

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

DEATH MARCH Rhapsody (17)
TO THE PARALLEL WORLD







Getting a taste of woodcarving
and street theater storytellers!!

NANA

An expressionless
homunculus.

TAMA

A cat-eared girl.

POCHI

A dog-eared girl.

DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD

17

HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN
FUN

NEW YORK

Copyright

Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 17

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

DEATH MARCH KARA HAJIMARU ISEKAI KYOSOKYOKU Vol. 17

© Hiro Ainana, shri 2019

First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2022 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2022

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Payton Campbell Designed by Yen Press Design:
Andy Swist Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Ainana, Hiro,
author. | Shri, illustrator. | McKeon, Jenny, translator.

Title: Death march to the parallel world rhapsody / Hiro Ainana ;
illustrations by shri ; translation by Jenny McKeon.

Other titles: Desu machi kara hajimaru isekai kyosokyoku. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen ON, 2017— Identifiers:
LCCN 2016050512 | ISBN 9780316504638 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316507974
(v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316556088 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316556095 (v. 4 :
pbk.) | ISBN 9780316556101 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316556125 (v. 6 : pbk.) |
ISBN 9781975301552 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301576 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975301590 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301613 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975301637 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301651 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975318390 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975320805 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975320829 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975320843 (v. 16 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975320867 (v. 17 : pbk.) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PL867.5.I56 D413 2017 | DDC 895.6/36d—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016050512>

ISBNs: 978-1-97532086-7 (paperback) 978-1-9753-2087-4 (ebook)

E3-20220602-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Conferring Honors](#)

[Interlude](#)

[The Peaceful Royal Capital](#)

[The Red-Rope Monsters](#)

[Forbidden Library](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Plenty of Pastimes](#)

[The Hapless Detective](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Evil-Cleansing Ceremony](#)

[The “God”](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

Conferring Honors

Satou here. Usually, I think of medals as being awarded to soldiers who fought hard on the battlefield. I didn't know anyone in Japan who'd ever received one, so they always seemed like a prop from some fictional world to me.

"In recognition of his feats of heroism, we hereby award honorary knight Sir Satou Pendragon with the Shiga Kingdom Cobalt Wing Blade Medal."

"It is my honor to receive this award."

In a ridiculously large and lavish hall, we were being honored for our successful defeat of a floormaster.

That being said, the king only said a few short words of praise at the beginning, then sat on the throne in silence. Then Marquis Kelten, the restored minister of the military, gave a very long congratulatory address and briefing, after which the king placed heavy-looking medals on me and Baronet Jelil the Scarlet Nobleman, who was representing the second group.

"Additionally, in recognition of their accomplishments, all other members of the esteemed Red Dragon's Roar and Pendragon will receive Crimson Wing Blade Medals or Scarlet Blade Medals."

Once Marquis Kelten gave his address, the king's role was apparently over. The facilitator announced, "His Majesty now takes his leave."

We all prostrated ourselves again and waited for the king to exit.

He was followed by a procession of various queen consorts, princes, and princesses, who'd been lined up behind him.

Most of the princesses seemed to have come to bear witness to Baronet Jelil's famously attractive features, while the princes were interested in the mithril explorers who defeated a floormaster. They were all dressed to the nines and

brimming with curiosity, but one of the princesses was making zero effort to hide her excitement.

She wore her reddish-blond hair in a neat updo, complete with an elegant tiara and a refined silver and diamond barrette, which clinked pleasantly against her signature silver-rimmed glasses as her head bobbed.

Her figure was the slenderest of the adult princesses, of whom she was the eldest here to remain unmarried.

According to my AR display, her name was Sistina. She was the sixth daughter of the Shigan king, twenty-one years old. At level 17, she was fairly talented with five skills: **Etiquette**, **Arithmetic**, **Transmutation**, **Practical Magic**, and **Summoning Magic**.

Based on her title, Master of Banned Books, she must have been the “oddball” princess I’d heard rumors about. If memory served, there was also a rumor that her engagement to Count Lessau’s son had just been broken off.

Once she brought up the rear of the royal procession, she was followed by Sir Juleburg of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, who was in charge of protecting the royal family, and some of the imperial knights. Then the door to the audience room clanged shut.

The other Shiga Eight members, the rest of the knights, and twenty or so robed magic users who appeared to be imperial mages stayed behind.

Of course, Sir Gouen was nowhere to be seen among the Shiga Eight, due to his part in the attack on Duke Vistall. He’d been forced to participate in the rebellion with his wife and children held hostage. Now, he was elsewhere on the royal grounds, confined in an unusual villa that was reserved for imprisoning high-ranking nobles.

“We will now begin awarding the Crimson Wing Blade Medals,” Marquis Kelten declared in a deep, authoritative voice that seemed at odds with his round physique.

The Crimson Wing Blade Medals were being given out to the leaders and core members of each of the parties that fought alongside Baronet Jelil’s Red Dragon’s Roar, ten in total, along with the seven members of my Pendragon

party.

Even the rugged explorers seemed intimidated by authority, or perhaps they were overwhelmed by the grandiose atmosphere of the audience hall; either way, their faces were stiff with nerves, any enthusiasm from the waiting room completely forgotten.

“From Pendragon, Liza of the Black Spear.”

“Present.”

Liza stood up, looking calm and dignified in her formal attire.

A stir arose from the crowd of approximately six hundred Holy Knights and imperial knights positioned on either side of the hall.

“*That’s* Liza of the Black Spear?”

“The famous Liza is a *woman*?”

“She’s just a little girl!”

“A dainty little demi-human like that...”

They had clearly heard that Liza had defeated Sir Juleburg the Unstoppable of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen and were surprised by her youth, gender, and race.

Liza briskly strode forward.

The vermilion scales that grew near her neck and wrists were hidden by her clothes, but her tail was swishing around proudly, glittering in the sunlight that filled the hall as if to represent her inner spirit.

She wasn’t permitted to carry her trademark weapon, the Magic Cricket Spear, since the king was present at the ceremony.

Though most people would never know it, I could tell from her gait that she was actually quite nervous.

“Your martial achievements were very impressive indeed.”

“I am honored.”

Liza’s military-style dress was paired with a short jacket, the perfect place to affix the medal, which was exactly what he did.

Marquis Kelten demanded “Silence!” several times, until finally the audience room fell still again. Clearing his throat, Kelten resumed the ceremony.

“From Pendragon, Arisa the Explosive Princess.”

“Present!”

With a cheerful reply, Arisa stepped forward elegantly.

Her lilac hair—considered a cursed color in this world—was safely hidden beneath a blonde wig.

Incidentally, the title Explosive Princess was one that she had made up for herself in the waiting room.

Again, there were murmurs of surprise about her age, though not nearly as many as when Liza revealed herself.

To avoid damaging the fabric of her dress, Arisa wore a cape with a little attachment for pinning the medal, as did the other girls.

“From Pendragon, Misanaria of the Bolenan Forest.”

“Mm.”

While she tottered along as usual, Mia’s pale aqua pigtails bounced her hood down to her shoulders, revealing her slightly pointed elf ears.

She didn’t seem all that interested in the medal, but the idea of matching with the rest of the group was enough of an incentive for her to participate.

“Isn’t Bolenan Forest the homeland of Trazayuya the Sage?”

“So that little girl is an elf?”

“An elf, huh? Never seen one before.”

The knights whispered among themselves at the sight of her.

It must have been unusual for them, since no elves resided in the royal capital.

“From Pendragon, Shieldmaiden Nana.”

“Affirmative.”

The blonde, busty beauty Nana stood up next.

Although her usual blank expression made it difficult to tell, the tone of her voice suggested she was considerably nervous.

I couldn't blame her. Though she resembled a high schooler, she was actually a magical man-made homunculus and technically less than a year old.

"From Pendragon, Cat Ninja Tama."

"Aye!"

Tama, a little girl with short white hair, cat ears, and a tail, hopped to her feet.

Behind her, Liza whispered, "The proper response is 'Present,'" and Tama corrected herself.

The generally laid-back Tama seemed uncharacteristically tense, her arms and legs moving in awkward unison.

Her Cat Ninja title was another one of Arisa's waiting room suggestions.

"From Pendragon, Dog Samurai Pochi."

"P-present, sir!"

Pochi, a girl with a brown bob cut and the ears and tail of a dog, responded in a loud voice due to nerves and bolted upright.

She was even stiffer than Tama, with her limbs completely rigid and her eyes practically spinning in panic.

Still, she somehow managed to accept the medal without causing any chaos.

When she returned to her seat and sighed in relief, Tama and Liza praised her affectionately.

Then, last but not least...

"From Pendragon, Maid Queen Lulu."

"P-present!"

The Japanese-style beauty, Lulu, stood up, light running down her long black hair as if caressing it lovingly.

She'd spent several extra hours on skincare and makeup today, making her already beautiful features stunning enough to bring down not just a country but

a planet or even a galaxy.

I couldn't even imagine how stunning she would look if she wasn't racked with nerves.

"Next, we will award the Scarlet Blade Medals."

The rest of the ceremony had nothing to do with us, so we sat back and watched while the mithril explorers who'd fought alongside Baronet Jelil's party received their awards.

About twenty people in total were granted the Scarlet Blade Medal.

That was still only around half of the total number who had challenged the floormaster with Jelil and survived. The others were in support roles, evidently not enough to earn them a medal or title.

Finally, Marquis Kelten announced that the peerage ceremony would take place at the start of the new year and advised those newly receiving titles to think about their desired family names. With that, the award ceremony ended.

Next, we were scheduled for lunch in another room, and at the second cycle of the afternoon—around three thirty in terms of Earth time—we would be the guests of honor at a ball.



The lunch was served in a dining hall big enough for around five hundred people, and it turned out to be a full-blown multi-course meal.

"This is sakura salmon meunière, kingdom-style."

A server in a butler-like uniform put plates of elegantly arranged food in front of us and explained each course.

Sakura salmon was frequently eaten during this season in the royal capital, and it was beloved by the nobility and citizens of the capital as a lucky dish said to bring success in life.

"Pochi, you can't just jab at it with a fork. Same for you, Tama—use the knife to cut it up first."

"But I can easily eat this in one bite, sir."

“No knife, no worriies...?”

“I’m telling you, it’s not a matter of whether you *can* or not!”

Arisa was doing her best to teach Pochi and Tama some table manners.

We usually ate as a group in private, which meant I hadn’t quite taught them proper etiquette for eating in public.

Maybe I ought to get the two of them a private tutor.

“Nana, why are there so many different utensils?” Liza asked Nana in a low voice.

“They are each properly suited to a different dish, I report.”

“Properly suited, you say...? Noble dining is very complex.”

I guess I should have Liza sit in on the tutoring sessions, too.

Meanwhile, Mia was sitting next to me, scowling down at the meunière on her plate.

The accompanying mushrooms were nowhere to be found.

“Mia, finish your food.”

“But I hate fish.”

“It’s already been deboned. Just pretend it’s something else, okay?”

“Mrrr...”

Mia furrowed her brow and glared at it more intensely.

It was bad manners to grumble with a fork in her mouth, but I had a hard time telling her this when it was so darn cute.

“Mia, your fork.”

“Mm.”

I gave her a gentle scolding after drinking in the scene for another moment.

It wasn’t much of a big deal, though: The servers didn’t comment, and most of all, it was nothing compared to the wild explorers boisterously eating at the next table over.

“Sgood. Ain’t enough food on the plate, though.”

“You said it. Forget fish; I need me some real meat.”

“And what’s with these glasses of wine? Gimme a tankard filled to the brim with ale!”

The moment they heard the word *meat*, the beastfolk girls’ eyes glittered, but I went ahead and informed them that the next dish would be meat before they could complain that they wanted meat, too.

“They’re a rowdy bunch,” Arisa commented, observing the explorers.

“No kidding,” I agreed.

The servers seemed to be expertly trained, as they didn’t even bat an eye at the explorers’ raucous behavior.

Instead, they made sure to bring extra helpings of the meat dish that followed, discretely informed the guests that they were welcome to seconds, and generally showed them the utmost hospitality.

Meanwhile, Baronet Jelil and the other noble-born explorers were pretending not to know their rowdy fellows as they enjoyed the food.

I decided to focus on enjoying it, too.

As one might expect from food at a royal palace, it was a feast not just for the taste buds but for the eyes. From beautiful garnishes to delicate dishes arranged in the shape of roses, every plate was studded with expert techniques.

“...Delicious.”

As I chewed, the flavors deepened in my mouth. I had never tasted something so good that it felt like a shame to swallow. Royal chefs really were on another level.

“Is it how it was prepared...? No, the freshness, the ripeness...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on Lulu murmuring to herself as she ate.

She must have been trying to learn from the flavors and techniques with her ever-curious mind.

It would be fun to figure out how to create these flavors on our own, though.

Taking a page out of Lulu's book, I took another bite with a focus on analyzing the cooking. My maxed-out "Cooking" skill and all my experience told me they had put an incredible amount of effort into every step of the process.

But at the same time, I could get a decent idea of the ingredients and seasoning involved, enough that I decided to try recreating it with Lulu and the others sometime in the future.





“Aah, that was delicious.”

After our very satisfying lunch, we took a break in the salon.

It was a crescent moon–shaped room that partially encircled the dining room, with roughly the same max capacity.

“Yummyyy...?”

“It was delishierous, sir.”

I recently learned that this new pet phrase of Pochi’s wasn’t a mispronunciation of *delicious*, but rather a made-up word meaning “dangerously delicious.”

“Yes, the meat dishes were particularly good.” Liza heaved a contented sigh. Then she added outrageously, “Though I might have preferred a slightly firmer mouthfeel...”

I’m pretty sure that if it was firm enough to please Liza, no one else would have been able to eat it.

“After the ball, that just leaves the new year’s peerage ceremony,” Arisa remarked, then turned to me. “How long are we staying in the royal capital anyway?”

“Not sure. Until after the auction halfway through the first month of the new year, maybe?”

The floormaster spoils we’d presented to the king would be sold at auction, after which the king would in turn present us with a cash reward calculated from the winning bids.

“Until then, we can all relax and do some sightseeing in the area.”

From there, my plan was for us to return to Labyrinth City for a while, then travel around the world together.

“Sounds like we’ll have a nice long span of time, then. What does everyone want to do?”

The others all gave various suggestions in response to Arisa’s question.

I wrote them all down in the notepad section of my menu to help me plan out our royal capital sightseeing.

“That’s a lot of ideas. Do you think a month will be enough?”

“If it’s not, we can always extend our stay.”

There was no need to hurry, after all.

“We’ve still got a while before the ball. What should we do?”

Arisa looked around at everyone.

“We should determine our family names, I propose.”

“Family names?”

“I suppose we were told to decide on one before the ceremony.” Liza folded her arms and nodded, her expression hard to read.

“Why don’t you all just use my family name?”

We’re basically a family anyway.

“I-is that a proposal?!”

Arisa leaped to her feet, wearing an exaggerated expression straight out of a comedy manga.

Tama and Pochi mimicked her reaction.

“Propooozal...?”

“Proropolis, sir!”

Like a telephone game, the word came out sounding like the Greek word for bee glue.

“Master...”

Lulu’s cheeks were cherry-blossom pink as she looked up at me with teary eyes.

The image had enough destructive force that I almost blurted out “Let’s get married” in a fit of emotion.

I didn’t want to darken those eyes with disappointment, but if I didn’t clear

things up soon, then Mia and the others might join in on the fray, too, so I shortly said no and flicked Arisa on the forehead for starting the misunderstanding.

“I just thought that since we’re like a family, it might be nice to have the same name.”

“Awww, maaan...”

“S-so that’s what you meant...”

Arisa and Lulu slumped their shoulders in disappointment.

On the other hand, Tama’s and Pochi’s eyes sparkled brightly. The word *family* must have struck a chord with them.

“Well, let’s not use Pendragon, then,” Arisa declared, recovering.

“I wanna maaatch...?”

“Exactly, sir. I think matching sounds good, too, sir.”

“Hear me out.”

As Tama and Pochi protested, Arisa grabbed them and pulled them close, speaking in a low voice.

“Instead of having it from the beginning, won’t it feel more meaningful to change your name to Pendragon after we get married?”

“Mm. Makes sense.”

“An excellent proposal. I concur.”

“I—I think so, too!”

Mia, Nana, and Lulu all quietly agreed with Arisa.

“Mew...?”

“I don’t really get it, sir.”

“It must be some kind of human custom,” Liza said to the confused Tama and Pochi.

“So what will you choose for your family names, then? Arisa, will you take your old last name?”

“Well, Lulu and I can’t lose our status as slaves because of our **Geis** curse, so...”

When their homeland, Kuvork Kingdom, was taken down by a neighboring kingdom, an imperial mage used a gift called Geis to curse them to live as slaves until death.

Currently, the only methods I knew of to dispel this curse were to have someone with the Geis gift remove or overwrite it, use the Divine Artifact passed down by the central Urion Temple, or have a high-ranking clergyman use Prayer Magic to remove the order.

Since we’d accomplished the goal of leveling everyone up in Labyrinth City, maybe my next priority should be removing their Geis.

“We’ll decline this peerage and go on without last names.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that.”

I had already taken action on this front.

“Bwuh?”

“I got permission from the prime minister by way of Miss Nina. While the removal of the slave contract and peerage ceremony via the City Core will have to wait for now, you’ll still have access to the rights of a proper noble.”

I was expecting to be given various conditions for this, but thanks to the Muno Barony’s Viscount Iron-Blooded Nina’s shrewdness, we were given special permission without any particular caveats.

“Incredible as always, master, I praise.”

“Mm. Good job.”

“*Très bieeeen...?*”

“Amazingly amazing, sir!”

“That’s great, Arisa and Lulu.”

“It really is. Thanks, master.”

“Master, thank you so much.”

It was well worth the effort to get such a happy reaction.

Realizing that gaining peerage would mean being released from their slave contracts, the beastfolk girls momentarily started protesting that they would rather stay slaves, but they relented when I reassured them: “Team Pendragon won’t be broken up, and we’ll stay together like always.”

“So back to the topic of family names. What do you think?”

“Let’s see... I don’t think it would be wise to take the name of a fallen royal family, and my family name from my previous life seems to be taken already. I’m not sure.”

When I was deciding on my own last name, Miss Nina had mentioned that there was already a hereditary knight with the name Tachibana.

Come to think of it, everyone else made name suggestions at the time, too.

If I remembered right...

“Lulu, you mentioned the name Watari before. It was your grandfather’s family name, right?”

“No, my great-grandfather.”

Since he was from a “very distant land,” I suspected he was either a Japanese person or the descendant of one.

“Why not go with Lulu Watari, then?” Arisa suggested.

“Maybe...” Lulu paused for a moment, then turned to me. “You don’t think it sounds strange, master?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then I’ll make my last name Watari.”

It seemed like she genuinely wanted to confirm whether it was strange, not to be talked out of it, so I did my best to assuage her fears.

“And you mentioned Nagasaki, right, Nana?”

“Yes, my previous master’s name, I report.”

Nana’s former master, Zen the Undead King, was a reincarnated Japanese

person.

“Very nice. It’s like you’re going from your former master’s name to being your current master’s bride.”

“That is an extremely good proposal, I declare!”

Arisa’s casual comment seemed to tickle Nana’s fancy. Expressionless as always, she turned her head toward Arisa so sharply that it startled her.

“Master, requesting permission to take Nagasaki as my last name.”

“Granted.”

I ignored the nonsense about becoming my bride.

“Liza, your suggestion was...Kishreshigarza?”

“Yes, the name of my tribe.”

“Then will you be going by Liza Kishreshigarza from now on?”

“That’d be great!” Arisa exclaimed before Liza could answer. “Once you become world-famous, maybe other scattered members of your clan will come find you!”

“Yes, perhaps,” Liza murmured, her voice full of emotion, then nodded. “Master, may I take the name of Liza Kishreshigarza?”

“Yeah, of course.”

I gave her a firmly reassuring answer, since Liza tended to be timid about these things.

“Tama and Pochi, what will you do?”

“Mrrr...?”

“Hard question, sir.”

Tama and Pochi furrowed their little brows intently.

“Maybe you could take the same name as Liza and become the Kishreshigarza sisters?”

Somehow, this made me picture them as three heroines in colorful leotards bounding through the night.

“Matchiiiiing...!”

“I wanna match, too, sir!”

“Then Tama Kishreshigarza and Pochi Kishreshigarza it is!” Arisa declared.

That was easy.

“What about Arisaaa...?”

“What will your name be, sir?”

“Hmm, I do have some attachment to the Tachibana name, but if there’s another Tachibana family already, things could become needlessly complicated...”

Arisa’s forehead wrinkled in contemplation.

“Why wouldn’t you take the same family name as Lulu?” Liza asked curiously.

“That’s a good point. Arisa Watari...it’s not half-bad. Would that be all right, dear sister?”

“Of course, I’d be happy to share a name with you.”

“Then we’ll be the Watari sisters.”

Arisa and Lulu smiled at each other.

...Hmm?

Realizing that Mia hadn’t joined the conversation in a while, I looked around and saw her alone on the balcony staring out into the garden.

Mia already had the last name Bolenan, so she didn’t need a new one, but I was surprised she wouldn’t want to comment on the other girls’ new names.

“Is something wrong?”

“Satou.” Mia turned around as I approached. “Calling me.”

Mia was pointing at the Royal Sakura, the giant cherry blossom tree visible beyond the garden.

“You want to go to the base of the Royal Sakura?”

“Mm.”

Mia's face was uncharacteristically serious.

"Sorry, Arisa, but could you contact me with Telephone when someone comes to get us for the ball?"

"Okey-dokey. As long as I get first dibs on sleeping next to master tonight."

"...Fine," Mia grunted with a dour expression.

"Oh, come on, I was only joking!"

Though Pochi and some of the others seemed to want to come along, I left them behind and went to the base of the Royal Sakura alone with Mia. I didn't want to get in trouble for wandering the castle grounds with a big group of people.



"There aren't as many people here as I expected."

Carrying Mia bridal-style, I used my "Invisibility" skill to keep us hidden as we headed toward the base of the Royal Sakura Tree.

There were fences and barriers protecting it along the way, not that they could slow me down.

We arrived at the base of the tree without being spotted by anyone.

"There."

Mia pointed at something that resembled an altar.

Isn't that...?

Hidden in the shadow of the altar was an ephemeral-looking girl.

Leaning against the trunk of the giant tree, her strawberry-blond hair rustling in the wind, she had a rather fantastical air about her.

This girl must have been the sakura spirit who was calling to Mia.

With that thought lodged in my mind, I foolishly walked up to the girl without even checking the AR display.

"Hello there."

"Wh-who goes there?!" The girl abruptly lost her mystical demeanor and

flared up at us with suspicion. “It is forbidden to approach the Holy Sakura Tree without the permission of the Sakura Protector.”

The “Holy Sakura Tree” must be the formal name of the Royal Sakura.

The girl continued in a civil tone, her expression still stern. “I know not what family you hail from, but I must ask that you leave at once.”

Not wanting to get chased out before we took care of what Mia came here for, I decided to put on a bit of an act to throw up a smoke screen.

“My apologies. We came because the great sakura tree called to us.”

“Th-that can’t be...”

The girl started to dismiss my words, but then a cherry blossom-colored woman rose out of the trunk of the tree.

Hmm, so that’s the sakura spirit, I thought.

“I’m sorry, little Sakura Protector. I need you to sleep for a moment, okay?”

The lovely woman who’d appeared from the tree touched the younger-looking girl and put her to sleep instantly.

Then, after gently brushing the girl’s hair out of her face, she straightened up and turned toward us.

“Hmm?”

As she tilted her head inquisitively, an AR display popped up next to her.

A dryad?

This was a much more voluptuous figure than the childlike dryads I was accustomed to meeting, yet her race clearly stated that she was a dryad, too.

“How good of you to come when I called, little one.”

“Mm.”

“Is this human a friend of yours?”

The dryad wore a bewildered expression.

She didn’t call me “boy” like the other dryads usually did, meaning this pink dryad must not have been part of the hive mind shared by the green ones I’d

met.

“I was going to put him to sleep, but it’s not working at all, mmn.”



Glancing down at the log in my AR display, I saw that I had resisted a **Sleep** effect several times.

She must have used a status effect attack on me without my noticing. I would have to be careful not to let her honeyed voice distract me.

“It’s okay.... Silent Bell.”

At Mia’s prompting, I showed the sakura dryad the Silent Bell of Bolenan.

“I suppose he is fine, then.”

This bell was given to me as proof of the elves’ trust in me, which seemed to be enough to reassure the sakura dryad, too.

Now that she was no longer wary of me, the sakura dryad began explaining her situation to Mia.

“You see, the flow of magic has been strange lately. It’s quite troubling—I can’t even seem to draw it out from the mana source in the royal capital. Do you think anything can be done, mmn?”

“Mrr?”

Mia activated Spirit Vision, her eyes turning silver as she looked around. Then she frowned and looked at me, evidently stumped. “Satou.”

I tried peering around with Spirit Vision, “Miasma Vision,” and “Magic Power Vision,” but I couldn’t find any visible problems aboveground.

I didn’t have any magic for investigating underground veins, nor could I directly send magic power into the ground without it evaporating; perhaps it would be best to direct my magic power into the roots of the Royal Sakura instead.

When I explained my planned investigation method to the sakura dryad, she had an alternate proposal.

“...Mmn, wait. It’s an old tree—go through me instead.”

“All right.”

The beautiful dryad reached out to pull me close, but Mia jumped in to stop her.

“Mrr. Lewd.”

“Oh-ho? How adorable for a little girl to be jealous of an adult, mmn? I suppose you are still a child, mmn.”

With Mia still wedged between us, the sakura dryad brought her face toward mine.

Just as the little green dryads did to absorb my magic, it appeared that she wanted to perform the transfer mouth-to-mouth.

Well, I’m hardly going to complain about sparing a kiss or two for such a curvy lady.

“Hands.”

Mia reached up and planted her fingers on our faces to prevent the kiss.

“Hands? But transferring through the hands would be far less efficient. It’ll be a bigger burden on the human, mmn?”

“He’s okay.”

Mia looked up at me with an expression that seemed to say “...right?”

I nodded. “I can handle a bigger burden just fine.”

“Is that so? Hands it is, then.”

I took the dryad’s velvety hand and gently let a little of my magic power flow into her.

“Mm, mmn...”

A rather suggestive sound escaped the dryad’s lips.

Ignoring it to the best of my ability, I focused on using the flow of magic to explore the channels of power.

“Hmm, you’re right. The magic is getting clogged somewhere.”

Figuring out the precise physical location of the blockage would be a bit of a pain.

Since the symptoms were similar to magic power blockages in magic tools and weapons, I could probably just clear it all out by sending magic through the

circuits at varying speeds.

“Mind if I give it a try?”

“Yes, please do, mmn.”

Once the dryad granted permission, I immediately started cleaning out the magic circuits.

“Mm, mmn... Oh my, aah, mmmn...”

“Mrr?”

I wished she would stop making such inappropriate sounds in front of Mia.

It was also quite distracting, so I did my best to ignore the dryad’s voice and continue my work.

This was going to be easier than I thought... No, wait, there was one area that was infuriatingly stagnant. Like trying to wash out a stubborn stain, I added more speed and used over half the remaining magic power to flush it out all at once.

...Uh-oh.

I must have gone overboard—I felt something like a magical valve break under my efforts.

“Sorry, dryad. I think I messed up and broke something.”

“No worries, boy...”

“Dryad?”

Instead of the attractive adult dryad from before, I was now face-to-face with the usual youthful green-skinned dryad.

“Ho-ho. Thanks to you, boy, I was able to connect with my outside selves for the first time in four hundred years.”

She explained that a warlock had used a magical curse to create a closed valve on the magic circuit in an attempt to prevent royal capital information from leaking to the elves four hundred years ago.

“As if I would talk to elves about humans anyway...”

The dryad hive mind seemed upset that the sakura dryad had been cut off from the rest.

“I’ll be able to make the sakura bloom again this year thanks to you, boy. Oh, I know! Take these.”

The dryad handed one pink sphere each to Mia and me.

They were called Sakura Pearls, and apparently, they were a kind of Treespirit Pearl. They could be used in the same way, but they also had the special effect of causing flowers to bloom.

Maybe I could perform miracles like sprouting flowers on a withered tree, like an old man from a certain folktale.

“Thank you, too, little one.”

“Mm.”

“In just a few days, the buds will start to grow, and they’ll bloom in less than ten. Enjoy this year’s flower viewing.”

With that, the dryad disappeared back into the tree.

Although I was tempted to use my Sakura Pearl on the Royal Sakura and enjoy some nighttime blooms, I held off. Since I had been warned against sending magic directly into it, using such a thing might shorten the life span of the giant tree.



“Go back.”

“Yes, we probably should...”

Once the dryad disappeared, we were going to leave right away. Then I decided to wake the Sakura Protector girl first so she wouldn’t sleep there all night and catch a cold.

I also figured that we would seem more suspicious if we left without a word. That wouldn’t be good, since she had seen our faces and all.

Come to think of it, I should probably mention to the king or prime minister sometime soon that the underground vein in the royal capital had been in a

strange state.

“She’s still not waking up.”

“Mm.”

I tried shaking the girl, but the dryad’s sleep spell appeared to be quite powerful.

Only after I used Break Magic on her and tried speaking to her and shaking her a few times did she finally stir.

“...Mm, what happened...?”

She blinked sluggishly, but as soon as she laid eyes on me, she jumped up and backed away.

“Oh good, you’re awake. I was worried because you passed out in the middle of our conversation.”

“...Passed out?”

“You seem quite exhausted. Are you not getting enough sleep?”

During our conversation, I’d realized that she was wearing makeup to cover the dark circles underneath her eyes.

For that matter, she’d been dozing off against the sakura tree when I first approached her, too.

“N-no, I’m perfectly fine...,” she mumbled, covering her face. “B-but more importantly! As I said before, the Holy Sakura Tree occupies sacred ground. Without the permission of a Sakura Protector like me, none may enter. Please return to wherever you came from at once.”

It was interesting that they only seemed to send intruders away, not arrest them, as I’d noticed before.

“Well, the truth is, we got lost and wandered in here by mistake. I apologize, but would you mind telling us how to get to the north reception hall?”

Of course, I knew where to go from my map. I just figured it would be less suspicious to ask for directions than to leave immediately.

“Allow me to escort you to the north reception hall, then. Might I ask your

name? I am Athena Raffol, a member of the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves.”

The girl indicated the crest on her robes as she introduced herself.

Her name sounded like it was straight out of Greek mythology, but there was no information that indicated she might be a reincarnation or a transference. It must be a coincidence, then.

She was a level-35 Earth Magic user, with titles like **Sakura Protector** and **Shiga Thirty-Three Staves**, the latter being reserved for imperial mages.

Still, between that and the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, the people of this kingdom seemed to really like titles that involved numbers.

I wouldn't be surprised if the Four Heavenly Kings or something popped up next.

“My name is Pendragon, a hereditary knight and vassal of the Muno Barony.”

Upon hearing my introduction, Ms. Athena dropped her polite demeanor all at once.

“Oh, geez. Silly me, thinking you were the foolish son of some important noble or other. Guess I worried for nothing.” Her tone shifted from courteous to casual at breakneck speed. “Well, whatever. I'll take you most of the way to the north reception hall anyway.”

“Thank you very much.”

“We're actually supposed to bring intruders to the guards' station, but it doesn't seem like you damaged the Holy Sakura Tree or anything. I'm sure you don't wanna lose your honorary title so soon after earning it, right?”

In spite of her uncaring attitude, she seemed to be a rather considerate girl.

“By the way, is that your kid sister?” Athena asked as we started walking.

“No.”

Mia huffed and turned away.

“Mia is my friend.”

“Friend? A little girl like that?”

Athena stopped to peer at Mia's face.

"...Athena! Aah, there you are."

A woman in glasses appeared from the shadows of a thicketed path, flanked by two ladies-in-waiting.

"Princess Sistina! We're in the presence of royalty, you two. Hurry up and bow!"

Athena dropped to her knees immediately, prompting us to do the same.

I swiftly followed suit, but Mia just crossed her arms and grumbled, "Don't wanna."

"Wh-why, you! Don't just stand there, get on your knees...!"

Flustered, Athena tugged on Mia's spring coat.

It came down along with her hood, revealing Mia's ears.

"...Huh? An elf?"

"Ow."

Mia shook free of Athena's grip.

"So you're an elf! What clan are you from?"

"Rude."

Mia puffed up her cheeks indignantly at the blunt question.

"Athena, that was rather impolite."

The princess scolded Athena and walked over to Mia.

Judging by the information in my AR, the two girls shadowing her doubled as bodyguards; they were level 30 with skills that specialized in hand-to-hand combat.

"You must be Lady Misanaria of Bolenan Forest."

I knew that elves were generally treated with reverence, but I was surprised to see that even the princess of a major kingdom would address one using "Lady."

“I am Sistina, sixth princess of the Shiga Kingdom.”

“Mm.” Mia nodded approval at the princess’s polite introduction and responded in kind. “My name is Misanaria Bolenan, youngest elf of Bolenan Forest, daughter of Lamisauya and Lilinatoa.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a tiny mutter from Athena: “B-Bolenan Forest? Isn’t that where Trazayuya the Sage was from?”

“Athena, Lady Misanaria is...”

Athena leaped to her feet and interrupted the princess, speaking quickly. “I-just because you’re an elf like the Great Sage doesn’t mean you’re all that special! My ancestors may have lost, but I swear I’ll accomplish far more than the Sage ever did!”

She jabbed a finger at Mia, who just looked confused by the sudden development.

“Mrr?”

This girl’s ancestors must have some kind of feud against Trazayuya.

“I hate elves, thinking they’re so special just for being born. I earned this position as an imperial sorcerer through hard work and talent, you know. I might only be a red sash in the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves right now, but someday, I swear I’ll become the leader of the imperial sorcerers and wear that silver sash!”

As Athena huffed and puffed, Mia appeared to be in a state of panic.

Before I could intervene, the ladies-in-waiting beat me to it.

“That’s quite enough of that.”

One of the ladies smacked Athena on the back of the head.

“You’re in front of Her Royal Highness.”

“A silver sash? Please. You’re being so impolite right now that you could very well get your red sash taken away.”

Their scolding snapped Athena out of her blind rage, and she turned bright red.

“I am so terribly sorry.”

She bowed to the princess, who only said, “You’re apologizing to the wrong person,” and nodded toward Mia.

“I shouldn’t have...”

“Wrong.”

Athena started to apologize, but Mia interrupted her with a brief mutter.

“Huh?” Athena blinked, not understanding.

Mia took the mithril badge from her small chest and showed it to her.

She was probably trying to say that she was putting in effort, too, not considering herself “special just for being born” as Athena had said about the elves.

“I-is that a mithril badge? Come to think of it, they said the latest mithril badges defeated upper and middle floormasters...”

This girl must not have been present at the ceremony.

“...Well, then I’ll just defeat a lower floormaster.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?! I’ll do it, you’ll see!”

Athena’s resentment toward elves was heating up again, rendering her apology moot.

Watching this, the ladies-in-waiting wore terrifyingly masklike expressions of veiled irritation.

“You just can’t.”

“That’s not true!”

Mia was likely trying to say that a mage wouldn’t be able to win alone, but her usual briefness obscured that meaning.

“We humans are always advancing while your people hide out in the woods, you know! Come to a royal sorcerer practice sometime, and I’ll show you what we humans can really do. Don’t blame me if you lose your nerve when you see

our synchronized sorcery!”

“Enough already!”

“How many times must we remind you?”

This time, both of the ladies-in-waiting smacked Athena at once.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized tearfully to Mia.

Seeing the frustration in her face, I decided to resolve the misunderstanding on Mia’s behalf.

“Might I interject?”

The princess nodded, and one of her ladies-in-waiting said “Go on” in her stead, granting me permission to explain Mia’s intentions to Athena.

“What Mia said just now wasn’t meant to mock you or human mages. She was only saying that a mage alone won’t be able to defeat a floormaster.”

“Really?”

“Mm.”

At my explanation, Athena’s anger faded, and she looked at Mia.

When Mia nodded, Athena’s shoulders slumped a little, as if she was embarrassed for getting so worked up before.

“Is that all you wished to say?”

“Yes, thank you.”

I nodded at the princess.

“Athena, how was the Holy Sakura Tree?”

“Unfortunately, nothing has changed.”

“I see...”

They must have been referring to the abnormality in the flow of magic that the sakura dryad mentioned.

I’d already solved that problem, but since the dryad put Athena to sleep before we talked about it, I didn’t say a word.

“Well then, I shall be heading back. Guide Lady Misanaria and her friend, please.”

With a word of farewell to Mia, the princess went back down the same path.

“...There’s the north reception hall.”

Not long after that encounter, the hall we were heading back to came into view.

“Just follow this path, and you’ll be there shortly.” With that, Athena turned to leave, then paused. “A-ahem. I’m sorry about all that earlier. But humans really are amazing, you know! You must come see our practice sometime. Don’t forget!”

Athena disguised her embarrassment by inviting Mia to their practice again, then fled with her face still bright red.

“Mrr?”

“What an entertaining girl.”

“Mm. Unique.”

She was a strange one, but I decided to take it as a win that we’d managed to make a connection with the imperial sorcerers.

I was interested in this “synchronized sorcery” thing myself, so it might be fun to go check it out with Mia sometime.



“Geh, a dryad?”

We returned to the salon in the north reception hall at the perfect time: The ball was just about to begin.

As we headed toward the main hall, I relayed the events at the Royal Sakura to the rest of my group, eliciting an immediate reaction from Arisa when I got to the part about the sakura dryad.

“Don’t tell me that little minx stole your lips again?”

“Nope. Blocked.”

Mia responded proudly to Arisa's concerns.

"Nice one, Mia!"

"Mm. On it."

Ignoring the pair of them, I continued the tale as we walked into the main hall.

The explorers who had already entered were looking up at the ceiling with whistles and cheers of admiration.

I followed their gaze to find a high, vaulted ceiling inlaid with colorful stained glass, filling the hall with a full spectrum of sparkling sunlight. The arches that supported the ceiling, too, were decorated with delicate carvings, enough that one could easily stare at them for hours.

The rest of my group followed suit and exclaimed in awe.

"Pretty!"

"It reminds me a bit of Lalakie." Lulu was referring to the floating island we'd explored in the southern seas.

"But there is no ocean above the ceiling, I report."

"Still sparklyyy...?"

"The ceiling's made of gems, sir!"

"It's quite a high ceiling."

Keeping an eye on their awestruck faces, I surveyed the rest of the hall.

There was a space in the center of the room big enough for some two hundred people to dance at the same time, surrounded by plenty of tables with beautiful tablecloths.

It appeared to be a standing meal, to make social exchanges easier, but there were also several sofas along the wall for dancers to rest, complete with decorative plants for privacy.

"Oh? Aren't you that lad from the labyrinth...?"

I turned around to find Viscount Belton, who I'd rescued from a spiderweb in

the Seiryuu City labyrinth.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Viscount Belton. I am now a vassal of Baron Muno, by the new name of Honorary Knight Pendragon.”

“...Pendragon?”

One of the gentlemen behind the viscount repeated my name.

My AR display revealed that he was Count Seiryuu, Viscount Belton’s master. The warrior-like gentleman next to him was Baronet Kigorri. Judging by the fact that he was a level-43 knight, he must be here as the count’s bodyguard.

“Do you know him, Belton?”

“Yes, in the Seiryuu City labyrinth...”

The viscount quietly told Count Seiryuu about me.

“Sir Pendragon, this is my lord and master, Count Seiryuu.” Viscount Belton introduced the count to me.

“I’ve heard your name in written reports from Sir Hence and civil official Toril. It seems you assisted my subordinates in Labyrinth City, too. I appreciate all your help.”

Sir Hence was the captain of Labyrinth City squad that Zena belonged to. After thanking me, Count Seiryuu added, “I never imagined you were the same man who saved Belton.”

“Sir Pendragon, come work for me,” he went on. “Our territory badly needs a capable person with intimate knowledge of labyrinths. If you join me, I can promise you the position of permanent baronet, perhaps even permanent baron if you work hard.”

“His Excellency is quite generous,” Viscount Belton added. “You can expect to be rewarded handsomely for your efforts.”

The two of them were trying to get me to change masters.

“Sorry, but you can’t have our man Satou.”

As I tried to decide how best to decline, a slim arm suddenly wound around my shoulder and pulled me back.

“Viscount Lottel!”

It was Nina Lottel, the viscount of the Muno Barony.

She was followed by Baron Muno himself and his daughter Karina.

“Hmm. So Ms. Iron-Blooded works for Muno, eh?”

“I suppose we don’t have a chance, then.”

“You’re damn right. Now get out of here, stat.”

Count Seiryuu and Viscount Belton raised the white flag and backed off.

I was worried that Viscount Nina would get in trouble for taking that tone with superior nobles, but she proudly informed me, “They earned that much by trying to steal someone else’s vassal.” Hopefully that meant she’d stayed within the realm of acceptability.

“Congratulations, Satou. You received your medals and all, eh?”

“Yes, I applaud you from the bottom of my heart...erm, indeed.”

“Thank you.”

I bowed my head to Baron Muno and Lady Karina.

Lady Karina’s speech was probably a bit strange because she was trying to use the phrases she’d had hammered into her head in her etiquette reeducation.

Still, she was even lovelier than usual today.

Her clothes were the same as always, but her ladies-in-waiting had scrubbed her skin to a supple sheen; her trademark tight blonde curls were perfectly arranged, light bouncing off them like glimmering gold. Even Raka, the amulet atop her ample chest, had been given a thorough polish.

“Arisa and the others were given honors as well, yes?”

“Yes, as you can see.”

Arisa, who had popped up at my elbow at some point, showed off the medal on her cape to Viscount Nina.

“Baronnn...?”

“And Karina, sir!”

“Ah, dear little Tama and Pochi! Can you show us your finest as well?”

“Look, look...”

“It’s a medal, sir!”

“You both look splendid indeed!”

“Aw, shucks...?”

“Tee-hee, sir.”

Tama and Pochi bashfully showed off their medals to Baron Muno and Lady Karina.

“Baron, I would like to be praised as well, I declare.”

“Proud.”

Nana and Mia showed their medals to the baron, too, and even Liza and Lulu were making sure theirs were in full view.

“Oh yes, I wanted to tell you something.” Viscount Nina leaned over to whisper in my ear. “It’s not official yet, but Baron Muno’s getting promoted. At the next kingdom meeting, he’ll become a count.”

“That’s fantastic news.”

“It’s only proper, since he’s the true lord of the territory now.”

This was because Baron Muno had gained control over the City Core.

“You’re likely to get a permanent baronet position as well.”

They had apparently decided to propose my promotion to a *permanent baron* at the noble negotiation that took place before the kingdom meeting. Viscount Nina explained that in cases of raising a rank more than two stages at a time, it was usually rejected in favor of one rank lower than the proposal. The final decision was up to the king himself.

“Unlike single-generation titles like honorary knight, you’ll need a legal spouse, so you’d better find yourself a wife. In fact, I bet I could find one for you.”

Viscount Nina glanced meaningfully toward Lady Karina.

It was a tempting offer, but I wasn't looking for any romantic partner except my beloved Lady Aaze, the high elf of Bolenan Forest.

"No need to worry about that."

"Mm."

Arisa and Mia stepped in, pointing at themselves and adding "He's got me!" and "Fiancée," respectively.

"Ah... I see."

Viscount Nina shot me a look that practically screamed "*you weirdo*."

I wanted to protest, but since Arisa and Mia had been kind enough to muddle the subject of marriage, I wasn't about to bring the topic back around.

"Well, you can think about that further down the line. You're still young enough, and I'm sure most people won't find fault with you being unmarried while you're still a newly promoted baronet."

Viscount Nina waved her hand as if dismissing the conversation.

Her phrasing seemed to imply that I would continue rising in the ranks, even though I wasn't particularly interested in racking up any more accomplishments as Satou.

"If anything, I'd prefer to stick with a single-generation title like an honorary baronet..."

"The only single-generation options are an honorary baronet or an honorary viscount like me, you know."

Viscount Nina's expression indicated that this route would be more of a pain.

"At any rate, let's get going."

Viscount Nina took my arm.

"Where to, if I may ask?"

"We're going to see if we can call dibs on any useful-looking explorers."

I guess she wanted to take this opportunity to secure some useful manpower, since the Muno Barony was perpetually short-staffed.

“Ooh, headhunting! I’ll come along, too, then!”

“Sure, that’d be great.”

Arisa promptly joined in, and we went around to the uncomfortable-looking mithril explorers, who were clearly out of their element.

Since their representative Baronet Jelil, the leader of the Red Dragon’s Roar, was aiming to retire from exploring and join the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, several of them gave very promising responses.

Including...

“That scout Marmot was a good score. He knows a lot about the small countries to the east—I bet he could handle all our intelligence gathering in the territory.” Viscount Nina grinned, evidently in a good mood. “And it’s all thanks to the funds you invested in us.”

“You’re the one who actually conducted negotiations, Miss Nina.”

“Sure, but that worked because your and Liza’s names are so famous.”

Viscount Nina snagged a glass of wine off a server’s plate and downed it in one gulp.

“Right, aren’t you and the other girls receiving titles, too, Arisa?” she said. “Have you picked out a family name?”

“I’ve been told there’s already a Sir Tachibana, so I was thinking of Watari, the same as Lulu.”

“Ahem, there is no knight by the name of Tachibana in the noble registry,” a voice interjected. “Perhaps you’re thinking of Sir Tachivana?”

I turned toward the sudden interloper to find a muscular old man with a friendly face. It was the prime minister.

“Oh, really?”

“No doubt about it. If you doubt me, check the registry yourself.”

“And what strange twist of fate brings you here, Your Excellency?” Viscount Nina cut in.

“I have some business with Sir Pendragon here,” he responded, looking at me

and adding in a low voice, “I heard he was young, but I didn’t expect him to be *this* young...”

“You’d better not be trying to recruit Satou, y’hear?”

“That’s right! Sir Satou is already promised to us, the Lloyd family!”

“Just a moment, Marquis Lloyd! Sir Satou belongs to everyone equally. Have you forgotten the agreement that he cannot be yoked to a single family?”

“Good heavens! It’s just as you say, Count Hohen!”

The famed gourmet lovers of Ouguch Duchy, Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen, joined in on the heels of Viscount Nina’s proclamation.

“No one is allowed to meddle with our Sir Satou, not even the prime minister.”

“Indeed, you had best be prepared to fight me to the death first.”

The pair of them jokingly raised their fists against the prime minister.

“Ahem, I can hardly believe my eyes. To think the day would come that Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen would get along so famously... It seems the rumors in the royal court were not just nonsense after all.”

The prime minister stroked his chin, looking impressed.

Personally, I found it hard to imagine Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen *not* getting along.

“At any rate, I did come to get a glimpse of the heroic man who held his own against the famous Gouen, but not to recruit him, understand?”

“Hmm, is that so?”

“I’ve never known you to *not* have a scheme up your sleeve...”

Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen didn’t seem to believe the prime minister at all.

“I have heard tell that Sir Pendragon enjoys travel and local delicacies. So I came to see if he might be interested in attending a banquet I am organizing featuring cuisine from many other nations.”

Ooh, that does sound kind of interesting.

“Don’t be fooled!”

“Exactly, he’s trying to sweet-talk you!”

Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen stepped in between us.

“No doubt you intend to offer him ‘cuisine’ made up of freakish combinations!”

“Honestly! How do you intend to take responsibility if something should happen to Sir Satou’s precious taste buds?!”

“*Freakish* is a harsh word. There are many different culinary traditions in other cultures, you know. To reject them all out of hand disqualifies you as a true gourmand. Don’t you agree, Sir Pendragon?”

“Yes, that’s fair.” I nodded.

“Well said.”

With that, the prime minister handed me a letter of invitation.

Evidently, the banquet would take place after the new year began.

“Well, it looks like more people are trickling in. I had best take my leave before anyone troublesome spots me.”

Just like that, the prime minister vanished.

“I suppose I’ll move on to my next job, too.”

Viscount Nina took Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen with her to an area where the duchy nobles were gathering. “Looks like she’s up to something,” Arisa said gleefully, following close behind.

“Well, then...”

I looked around, wondering what to do next.

The hall was really starting to fill up with people. While we were recruiting explorers and chatting with the prime minister, the ball had begun in earnest.

Aside from those of us who had received medals, the rest of the participants were lesser nobles, upper-class military nobles like Marquis Kelten, and some

territory lords like Count Seiryuu. There were no members of the royal family in attendance.

Duke Vistall and his family weren't present, either, but their associated nobles were aggressively recruiting mithril explorers.

"Oracle priestesses have been fainting after receiving messages?"

An alarming sentence caught my attention.

Some lesser nobles' civil officials, here in attendance of more important people, were whispering rumors among themselves.

"Which temple?"

"All of them, I tell you. The Oracles say 'unprecedented danger is approaching the royal capital,' I heard."

I searched my map but didn't see any dangers of the sort.

"You 'heard,' huh? Are you just spreading rumors again?"

An unpleasant-looking young man cut into the conversation.

"L-Lord Merkray!"

"That kind of thing is just an old trick to collect more offerings. After a while, I'm sure they'll just announce that they staved off the danger with pious prayer or something like that."

"B-but surely priestesses wouldn't lie about an Oracle..."

Merkray snorted at the official. "Did the priestess really say anything about an Oracle?"

"...Ah!"

The man seemed to realize then that the temple hadn't actually announced an Oracle prediction.

"Stirring up fears without actually confirming an Oracle is just one way they keep people donating to their temples. You all ought to remember that so you don't get fooled."

Smirking, Merkray turned back to his posse, and they walked away, snickering

together. “Bet they’ll get a lot of suckers this time, huh?” “Yeah, since a demon just appeared in the royal capital recently.”

Was it really just a line to collect more donations, though?

Well, I didn’t see any particularly bad signs during my map search. I could always check with the king about it next time I visited.

Dismissing the thought for the time being, I looked around again.

There were other guests besides nobles, including many merchants and traders.

I also spotted Mr. Homimudory, the weaselfolk president of the Sahbe Company who I’d met at the garden party hosted by Count Litton’s wife, Ema. Since I’d just received a congratulatory gift from his company that morning, I went over to pay him a quick greeting.

“She-she-she, congratulations on receiving your Cobalt Wing Blade Medal.”

Mr. Homimudory spoke with far more fluency than most beastfolk I had met.

“Sir Pendragon, do you have a moment?”

After I spoke with Mr. Homimudory, a noble from Marquis Kelten’s crowd flagged me down.

“Have you been in business with weaselfolk merchants for long?”

“No, I just met him the other day at Mrs. Litton’s garden party. Why?”

“I see... Well, just a word of warning. Be careful of those weaselfolk merchants. Any merchant is worth being wary of as it is, but the merchants from that particular place have a different sense of ethics from ours. They can stray from the law without even knowing it. Just be careful not to tarnish your own reputation because of it.”

What I thought at first was going to be demi-human discrimination turned out to be a warning about the possibility of cross-cultural misunderstandings.

“Thank you for letting me know.”

After that, he also invited me to join Marquis Kelten’s faction, but I shut him down by saying that I didn’t intend to serve anyone but Baron Muno.

“Master!” Arisa rushed over to me, looking unusually frantic. “Come here for a minute...”

I excused myself from the Marquis Kelten supporters and followed after her.

“Look, over there. That priest.”

“Which one? There are three.”

“Look, the pretty one who seems like his name would be Lawrence or something.”

Arisa was pointing at a handsome man who looked like a character straight out of a *shojo* manga.

According to my AR, he was a level-51 cardinal of Parion Province by the name of Hozzunus.

He wore a turban-style head wrap and a great number of golden accessories, perhaps a traditional look in Parion Province.

His high level came with quite a few skills: “Holy Magic: Parion Faith,” “Theology: Parion Faith,” “Light Magic,” “Analyze Person,” “Sociability,” “Negotiation,” “Mediation,” “Bargaining,” “Persuasion,” “Debating,” “Musicianship,” “Meditation,” “Chant Shortening,” “Self-Defense,” and so on.

He had some impressive titles, too, including Saint, Darling of the Goddess, and Challenger of the God’s Trials.

“Wow, that’s a lot of skills.”

“Huh...? You can see them?”

“Wait, you can’t?”

As I checked with my “Analyze” skill instead, I saw that only his name, job title, and the skills “Holy Magic: Parion Faith” and “Theology: Parion Faith” were normally visible. The only title that could be seen with Analyze was Saint, too. Even his level went down to 32.

“Ah, I can’t see most of them with ‘Analyze.’ He must have an especially good recognition-inhibiting magic tool.”

“I thought so. Something looked off, and he didn’t have many skills for his

level.”

That was why she broke off from the plotting trio and came to get me.

I relayed the information from my AR display to Arisa.

“Huh. The titles on their own make him sound like some kind of hero.”

I had to agree. “With such a high level, I wonder if he’d be able to use Prayer Magic.”

“Maybe? Even if he can, I doubt he’s nice enough to help some total strangers,” Arisa said. “So no need to go out of your way for us.”

Evidently, she had seen through my scheme to see if I could get Cardinal Hozzunas to use Prayer Magic to free Arisa and Lulu from their Geis.

In spite of what Arisa said, I figured I could at least deduce if there was anything he might want that I could offer in exchange.

It was worth trying to get friendly with him first, right?

“Aah...maybe that’s the recognition-inhibiting item there? Look at that thing on Lawrence’s wrist, master. The golden-yellow one.”

I did as Arisa requested and took another look at Lawrence—I mean, Cardinal Hozzunas.

Though the object was hard to see under his long sleeves, I was able to get information in my AR display once I realized it was there. It was called a **Brace of Stolen Divinity: A Hallowed Artifact (Counterfeit) with the ability to hide and disguise one’s status.**

The field for the creator’s name was blank. Either the person who made it could render their name blank like me, they simply had no name to begin with, or there was a method of deleting that information from the item.

I told Arisa about this new information from my AR.

“Counterfeit, huh...? It’s amazing that it could still fool my Divine Status Check. We would never have known if it weren’t for your cheat-mode analyzing abilities.”

The “cheat-mode” part was uncalled-for.

The next time I went to see the king or the prime minister, I would probably have to tell them about Cardinal Hozzunas's recognition-inhibiting item and his true level.

I wanted to befriend him, but this was a different matter. It's always better to nip potential problems in the bud right away.

Still, if the counterfeit was this powerful, I wonder if the real thing would actually be able to fool even my AR display.

"Vile demi-human! How dare you interrupt the words of Lord Frinj, heir of the esteemed Merkray family! This is punishable by certain death!"

A shrill cry echoed from across the room.

Drawing closer, I saw that a crowd had formed around a few upper noble children, who were telling off a ratfolk explorer who was defending a wimpy-looking explorer in a robe.

"What happened here?"

"A noble was being pushy about trying to recruit Rindor, so Garitz stepped in to rescue him, but it looks like that made the noble mad..."

A young explorer boy explained the situation to me, albeit with a few too many proper nouns.

My guess was that Rindor was the explorer in the robe, and Garitz was the ratfolk explorer.

"You're not going to help?" Arisa asked.

"Those are upper nobles, you fool," a noble-born explorer responded. "And they're an old family associated with the minister of the military, no less."

"Well then, since I'm an outsider, I'll just step in..."

I didn't want these rude people to ruin a celebration of my fellow explorers' accomplishments.

I started to step forward, but the noble-born explorer grabbed my shoulder and stopped me.

"Wait! The old noble families don't make distinctions between explorers. If

you incur their wrath, they might find a way to call off my friends' new peerage. The best thing to do is just grin and bear it."

It was rare for any nonhumans to get a shot at a title, so no one wanted to risk ruining their chances.

But if direct contact wouldn't work, I'd just have to find a way to indirectly—"Oh, it's Lawrence!" Arisa whispered.

I put a pause on my silent plotting and looked up to see Cardinal Hozzunus stepping in.

"That is enough. One-sidedly belittling others is hardly a flattering look for you."

"Don't mock me, priest! It's our duty as honorable nobles to guide the churlish lowborn! Stay out of it until the damned funeral!"

The nasty noble reflexively responded to the cardinal's words with defiance.

He didn't appear to realize he was actually snapping at a respected figure from Parion Province.

"And who decided they are 'lowborn'? Every living being in this world—with the exception of dragons and demons—is a child of the seven gods. None are high or low among them."

"Lawrence sure knows what's up." Beside me, Arisa nodded along wisely. "It's true, we're all brothers and sisters."

"Let me tell you something, priest..."

"Lord Frinj, you mustn't!"

One of the mocking noble's servants seemed to recognize Cardinal Hozzunus and desperately tried to stop his master from picking a fight, but the noble shook him off and went on an even wilder rant.

"If you think we peerless nobles of the Shiga Kingdom are on the same level as some lowly rats, you're dead wrong! A priest who's only good for first aid and grave-keeping shouldn't—"

The rude noble was interrupted mid-sentence by a massive fist flying into his

face.

“Buguh!” With a yelp of pain right out of a comedy manga, the noble crumpled to the floor.

According to my AR display, the large man responsible was Count Boppan, the vice minister of the military.

“Cardinal Hozzunas, I must beg your forgiveness for my subordinate’s unbearable rudeness.”

His muscles practically bulging out of his formal wear, Count Boppan bowed deeply to Cardinal Hozzunas.

“It is not I to whom you should apologize. Please direct it to these fellows instead.”

“Who?”

Count Boppan looked confused. He must not have seen what happened at the beginning.

“Your Excellency, he refers to that demi-human—erm, the ratfolk gentleman and the conjurer there.”

A young lesser nobleman who’d witnessed the entire incident politely pointed them out to Count Boppan.

“I see. Good explorers, I apologize for my subordinates’ misconduct.”

The explorers in question looked sheepish and rather bewildered as they accepted the count’s apology.

However, there were murmured complaints about this from the military nobles. They seemed to dislike the idea that an upper noble, especially the minister of the military, would apologize to some non-noble, nonhuman explorers for any reason.

“Your Excellency! How could you beat an honorable noble like myself and bow your head to some vulgar demi-humans and explorer rabble?! Have you no respect for the formalities of the kingdom nobility?!”

The rude noble tore into Count Boppan, his friends backing him up.

“Foolish boy! Have you forgotten the words of the great ancestral king Yamato?! ‘All races are equal’! Go home, repent, and reflect on the meaning of those words!”

The noble trembled at the count’s wrathful scolding until some guards ran up and escorted him out.

“As long as we have people like you, the teachings of King Yamato will never die, it seems,” Cardinal Hozunas remarked mildly to Count Boppan.

“Not at all. I am ashamed that I have failed to properly educate my subordinates.”

It appeared that the minor difficulty had been resolved.

“Lord Satou!”

A pretty girl with pink hair straight out of an anime—Princess Menea of the Lumork Kingdom, who was studying at the royal academy here in the capital—flounced up to me with several pretty young noblewomen in tow. Behind her were several noble daughters from the Ougoch Duchy; I’d met a few of them at tea parties.

“Have you danced with Lady Karina yet? If so, then I would be delighted if you danced with me next.”

“And me after Princess Menea, please.”

“No, I wish to be next!”

The young ladies clamored around me. A shame they were all young enough to be in middle school.

“Stop right therrrrrrre!”

“Mm. Promised.”

The iron-wall pair of Arisa and Mia leaped to my defense.

Now that they mentioned it, it was true that I had promised to dance with all my traveling companions, but I hadn’t yet gotten around to making good on my promise.

“My apologies, Princess Menea. I’m afraid I already...”

“Oh, very well. I can wait until after they’ve had their turns.”

The ever-considerate Princess Menea politely withdrew, and the other noblewomen followed suit, allowing Arisa and the others to take precedent.

“By the way, Princess Menea, those kids aren’t with you?” Arisa asked as we made our way to the dance floor.

Her deliberate vagueness was in reference to the Japanese girls who had been summoned in Lumork Kingdom and were now under Princess Menea’s protection.

“No, Aoi is studying at a private institution downtown, and Yui has a live-in apprenticeship at the Ghookuts Company.”

She added that Aoi had been admitted to the private school by a teacher who took a liking to her, and Yui had gotten the apprenticeship through her romantic partner’s recommendation.

While we were discussing this, we reached the dance floor, and I danced with each of my companions in turn, as promised.

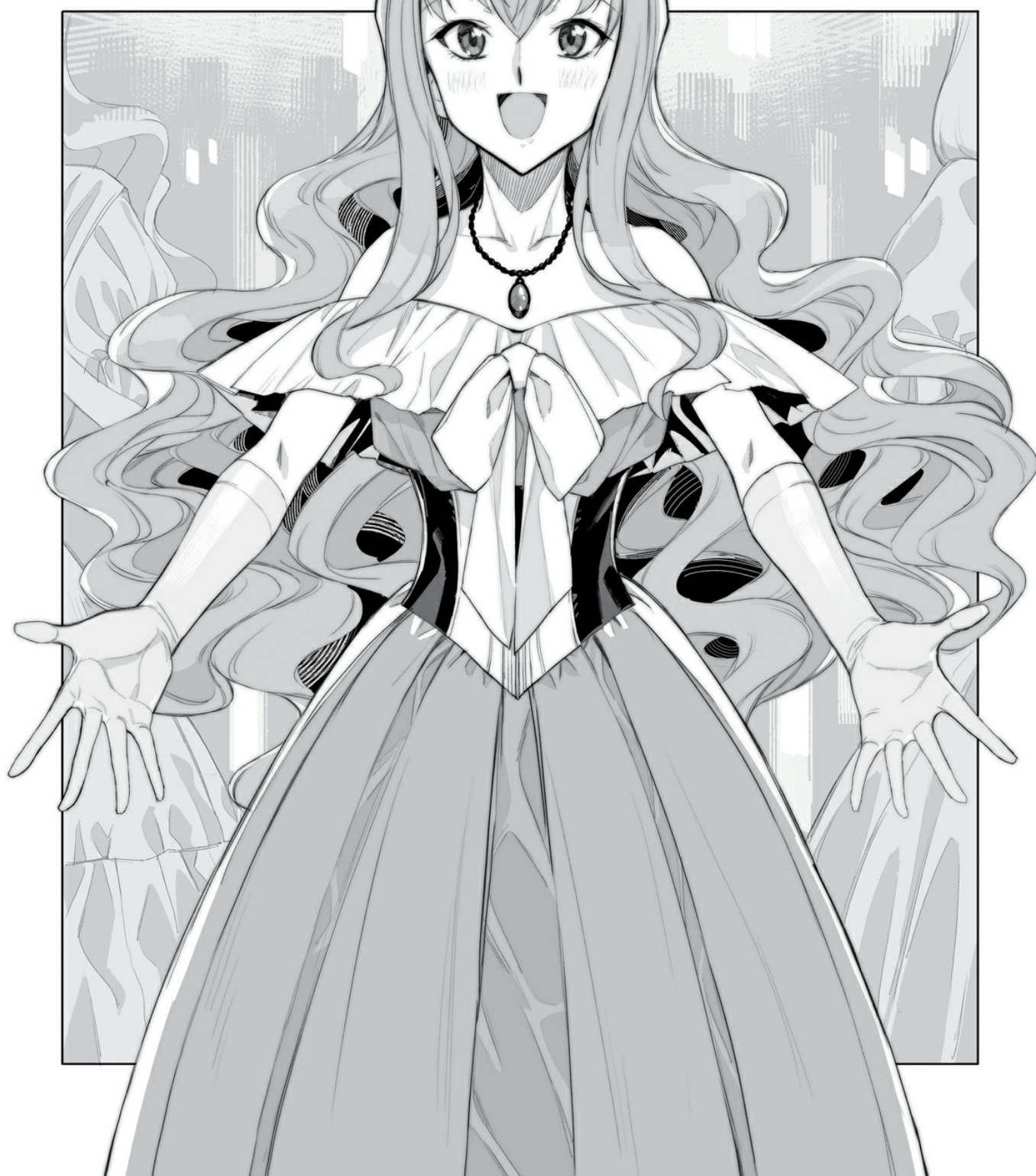
Dancing with Arisa and Mia was normal enough, but...

Tama’s twirl-based dance featuring gleeful exclamations of “Spin...spinny spin...” and Pochi’s mysterious moves accompanied by declarations like “Pochi the dance fairy is moved by this music, sir” drew smiles of amusement from the people around us.

Still, at least that lightened the mood enough for the awkward explorers to gather the courage to join in on the dancing.

“Ms. Liza, your smile is too stiff!”

“It’s important to relax, I declare.”



Even Liza, who was unaccustomed to dancing, managed to pull off a sharp and elegant dance with me.

After I'd danced with Nana, who seemed to be enjoying herself despite her usual expressionless face, and an embarrassed-looking Lulu, Pochi and Tama dragged Lady Karina over to dance with me as well. Then I went on to dance with Princess Menea and company one by one, too.

It was fairly exhausting, even with my ridiculously high-level stamina.

"You there."

As I was quenching my thirst with some grape juice a waitress had given me, I was approached by someone unexpected.

Her face was hidden by a veil, but there weren't many people in this land who wore glasses. It was Princess Sistina, who I'd met on the way back from the Royal Sakura Tree.

"Do you by any chance know where Viscount Siemmen might be?"

According to my map information, Viscount Siemmen was in a separate area reserved for business talk.

I told her as much, pretending that I had seen him not long ago. While I was a little curious why a princess might want Viscount Siemmen, who ran a scroll workshop in the old capital, I thought it would be impolite to ask.

"I see. Thank you."

With that, the princess walked away toward the business area with her two ladies-in-waiting following close behind.

"Satou."

"Master, the food is waiting, I report."

Mia and Nana came over and led me to the buffet area.

But while I just wanted some snacks to fill my stomach, I also found a bunch of explorers engaged in furious battle there.

The food was delicious, but I would have preferred a slightly more peaceful meal.

Interlude

“...What did you say?”

A man’s voice echoed with displeasure in the dark room.

KWYWEEEE.

The strange little bat-winged figure perched on the man’s shoulder let out a grating shriek. It was a demon known as an imp.

As the messenger trembled, a beastfolk servant rasped out an order.

“Repeat that for my lord.”

“O-of course. Our base underneath the royal capital has been destroyed.”

The man who the servant called “my lord” scowled more deeply. “Was it the kingdom knights?”

“N-no. According to my subordinate’s investigation, it was a magical attack.”

When the man *tsked* irritably, the messenger hastily continued.

According to his report, their base that had been stealing magic power from the royal capital was decimated by an unknown assailant through the underground vein, and it was impossible to tell from the remains what kind of magic had been used.

“My subordinate believes the magic devices in the base may have been destroyed by a sudden surge of huge amounts of magic through the underground vein, not direct-attack magic...”

“Huge amounts of magic, you say?”

“How much magic, exactly?!”

The servant supplemented the lord’s words.

“W-well, our calculations suggest it would have to be someone with far more

magic than even a greater demon or demon lord...”

“Where could such a powerful person have come from?!”

“It could be the king of Shiga Kingdom using the power of the land, or perhaps...” Cowering away from the raging servant, the messenger voiced his conclusion but was interrupted by the lord himself.

“The hero of the Shiga Kingdom, eh?”

That unexpectedly powerful hero had brought down the Golden Boar Lord in the labyrinth beneath the old capital and even conquered the Dogheaded Demon Lord who appeared in the desert, all with relative ease; such a feat was surely possible for him.

“To think he would destroy our base that was vital to causing chaos behind enemy lines... He must have sniffed out our plot somehow.”

The lord was reflecting on how many of the sites they’d attempted to establish in the Shiga Kingdom over the past half year had been discovered almost immediately after creation.

That was why he had prepared this plan so thoroughly—and therefore he was surprised that it had now hit a setback from the very outset in spite of all those efforts.

“Do not worry, my lord,” the servant whispered to his furious master. “We have other strategies to distract the hero from our plans.”

He was holding a flutelike magic tool and a small cage containing a cricket.

These were samples of the props they had originally intended to use later in the plan.

“It is premature, but I suppose we have no choice...”

Murmuring in a low voice, the lord approved moving up the schedule.

There were too many uncertain elements in this move compared to their original plan, but they had no other options left.

“I expect great things.”

“I am unworthy of such an honor, sire.”

The servant bowed deeply.

“All is in the name of guiding the ignorant masses with the Light of Freedom.”

The lord’s words lingered in the darkness.

The Peaceful Royal Capital

Satou here. When I was a kid, my family and friends would throw parties to celebrate my birthday. But as a working adult, I feel like there's not much celebration around birthdays anymore—you just treat someone to lunch or a few drinks.

“Now, where should we go for fun today?”

In the living room of our royal capital mansion, we looked over a map marked with sightseeing locations.

I'd attached sticky notes to the places my companions requested so that we could plan around those in particular.

“Ta-daaaa!”

Arisa burst into the room and struck a strange pose, complete with a little celebratory jingle.

She was wearing an elf-style spring dress; perhaps she had it made in the elf village when we went there with Nana's sisters. The tights on her feet were so tightly fitted that they looked almost like...

“Wait, are those real stockings?”

“Exactamundo!”

Where does she get these phrases?

“Now, prepare to be bewitched by the beautiful Arisa's slender legs...!”

Diving onto the sofa across from me, Arisa extended her stocking-clad leg toward me with what was probably meant to be a suggestive smolder in her eyes.

That was all well and good, except since she had the appearance of a little girl, it wasn't so much sexy as adorable, with the charm of a kid trying to act like an

adult.

“I’ll take a look, then.”

Since I had her permission, I gave the stockings a light pinch, testing out the feel of the fabric and so on.

They actually felt very well-made. The high-quality material was about as thin as 25-denier tights.

“Hey, wait, that’s so forward... Aaah, you naughty boy, you...!”

Arisa started goofing around, probably to hide her actual embarrassment, so I let go of her leg.

“It doesn’t seem to be nylon, but it looks and feels just like it.”

“Eh-heh-heh... I remembered that there was a way to spin thread from spiderwebs, right? So I brought in a bunch of webbing that we got from the labyrinths and had some samples made.”

When we went to Bolenan Forest for Nana’s sisters to train, Arisa had gone to the sewing studio several times. She must have been getting these stockings made.

“It involves Water Magic and alchemy, but the spiders that make the thread are in that unpopular poisonous-bug part of area four—I think they’ll be able to stock up on supplies even without our help.”

I asked Arisa about the species of spider monster, searched the map, and discovered that they lived in a fairly widespread area. They ranged from level 5 to 13, making them an easy enough hunting target for any mid-level explorer with proper protection from poison.

“Looks good to me.”

“But now I have a request for you, master! Can you customize the elf alchemy and Water Magic needed to make these so that humans can use them?”

“Yeah, sure.”

I could do a little extra work if it meant the ladies around town would someday be showing off their gorgeous legs in stockings.

“Satou.”

“Ta-daa, sir!”

“Tra-la-la...?”

Mia, Pochi, and Tama entered in white stockings.

Apparently, Arisa wasn't the only one trying on the new stockings.

“Stockings feel quite unusual to wear.”

Liza looked quite alluring in scarlet stockings.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed they had a roselike pattern embroidered on them with dark red thread.

“My skin looks the same color as always, I declare.”

“It feels like my legs look a little slimmer and smoother than usual.”

Nana wore nude-colored tights, while Lulu wore black stockings like Arisa.

“You all look very cute.”

The rest of the group all looked pleased and bashful, but Nana alone tilted her head in confusion.

“What's the matter, Nana?”

“Master, the base of my stockings feels strange, I report.”

Nana casually flipped her skirt up and pointed at the area where her underwear was beneath the stockings.

“N-Nana, stop!” Lulu cried. “Cover yourself up! You can't expose yourself to people.”

“But I am showing my stockings, not my underwear, I protest.”

“That doesn't matter if you can see through the stockings!”

“Satou.”

“How long are you going to look, huh?!”

The iron-wall pair of Mia and Arisa latched on to my face so I couldn't see Nana.

I wasn't particularly looking at her underwear, but rather than making a feeble-sounding excuse, I just waited for the situation to resolve itself.

"Well? Do you understand the appeal of stockings now?"

"Mm. Got it."

"Good, because we're just getting started! Settle in for a lecture on how to work those stockings to the fullest!"

Arisa started instructing everyone in the best poses for showing off their stockings.

I watched them bustle around as I picked out an itinerary for the day's royal capital sightseeing.





“Byooti-full...”

Gazing up at a statue of a giant elephant in the courtyard, Tama’s eyes sparkled as she exclaimed with glee.

We were at the home of the sculptor we had met in the museum.

A servant led us down a narrow pathway shaded from the sun by tall hedges.

“Très bieeeen...?”

“Excellente, sir!”

This time it was a statue of a male deer.

Every one of them looked like they might spring to life at any moment.

It looked at first like Pochi was just mimicking Tama, but her furiously wagging tail indicated that she was just as excited as she sounded.

“The surface looks so strange. I doubt this could’ve been made with a chisel alone—maybe there was Earth Magic involved?”

“Yeah, probably.”

Despite being made of stone, many of the statues had smooth lines like something sculpted out of clay. It was probably possible in theory to accomplish this with normal polishing, but it seemed more realistic to assume that they used Earth Magic or a similar magic tool.

“Wind.”

At the spot where Mia murmured the word, there was a sensation like passing through a thin film of air, after which the sound of stone being chiseled was suddenly audible.

“Master, there are many people fighting against stone, I report.”

“They must be carvers.”

A little farther down the path, we could see people carving.

“Rhythmic.”

“It certainly is, Mia.”

As I listened to my group talking, the guide called out to the master of the shop, who caught my eye.

“Ah, good, you made it.”

The apron-clad gentleman pulled off the helmet he wore in place of goggles and beamed at us.

After talking for a few minutes, he invited us to try carving some lumber remnants ourselves, an offer we happily accepted.

“Master, I have located a heretical statue, I report.”

Nana pointed at a poorly carved statue lying near the pile of lumber.

“Oh yes. That was a failed attempt by a youngster from a major noble family,” a friendly craftsman explained to us as he disposed of some sand and gravel. “You can use that, too, if you’d like.”

“What a strange shape... Whatever was he trying to make, I wonder?”

“He claimed it was an ‘evil statue’ to use in some ritual.”

““An evil statue?!”” Arisa and I exclaimed in unison, turning to stare at the craftsman who had uttered the concerning phrase.

“Please don’t worry—it’s a purely baseless story. The boy said it was for a Wind of Freedom ritual, but those lot are just a bunch of loafers with an interest in anything strange or suspicious.”

A polite craftsman stepped in to confirm the other one’s statement.

Come to think of it, the guildmaster of the explorers’ guild also told me that the Wind of Freedom was just a casual group.

But the name sounded so similar to the demon lord–worshipping groups like Wings of Freedom and Light of Freedom that it automatically put me on high alert.

“That young man is so sensitive that he would faint if you filleted a fish in front of him.”

“Yes, even if an insect lands on his work, he just blows on it frantically until it

flies away.”

They explained that he was quite popular as a customer or patron because he would buy any strange-looking art or statues at a high price.

“So I assure you, there’s nothing to worry about.”

The craftsmen concluded their explanation about the “evil statue,” and after a quick introduction to the basics, we moved on to our hands-on carving experience.

“It’s very realistic. How many years have you been carving, eh?”

“Oh, this is my first time.”

Since I got the “Carving” skill right away, I used my huge stash of skill points to level it up.

“Ha-ha, well, that’s impressive.” He seemed to think I was joking. “But it could actually be a touch *too* realistic. You should try giving yourself some creative freedom to play around, like these young ladies. I’m sure you could come up with something even more spectacular.”

The gentleman gestured at Pochi’s and Nana’s sculptures, which depicted a manga-style meat stick and a Cubism-esque baby chick, respectively.

Lulu was working on a bust of some kind: She’d had Liza cut the stone for her with a Magic Sword and was now intently chiseling away at the collarbone area.

Arisa, meanwhile...

“Arisa, if you make something obscene, I’m confiscating it.”

“S-silly master! You really think your little Arisa would do such a thing?”

Remembering the incident at the ceramics class, I gave Arisa a warning with the Space Magic spell Telephone, which caused her to get visibly shaken and make excuses out loud.

She happened to be bringing her hammer down on the chisel at the same time and accidentally slammed it too hard into the small stone statue’s neck, knocking off its head. I’m guessing she was using Space Magic to cover for her lack of physical strength.

“Wow, you’ve got some serious strength there, little lady. Hit it a little more gently, hmm?”

“Tee-hee, I made an oopsie.”

Arisa giggled sheepishly at the nearby sculptor, then started making a new miniature statue.

Let’s hope she makes something normal this time.

“Hmm, it’s a bit rough, but in a good way.”

“Thank you, I’m honored.”

The gentleman sculptor was praising Liza’s statue of a giant snake.

It reminded me of the first monster the beastfolk girls defeated all on their own, although it could just be my imagination.

“Oh-ho...”

Finally, as he walked over to where Tama was working, the gentleman let out a sigh of admiration.

“Incredible! This child’s sensibilities and skills are nothing short of natural genius.”

There certainly was something about Tama’s statue of a fawn that spoke to the soul.

“It looks yummy, sir.”

“Yes, it really does stimulate the appetite.”

“I agree. I would love to cook that.”

Wow, they’re not kidding.

Pochi, Liza, and Lulu were right: For some reason, Tama’s fawn statue had a strange effect of stirring one’s appetite.

“Sir Pendragon, this little one’s gift simply must be cultivated. If you are willing, and if she herself is interested, please bring her back for further studies anytime you wish.”

The gentleman seemed taken with Tama’s talent.

“What do you think, Tama? Want to practice being a sculptor?”

“Aye!” Tama nodded.

She was already training to be a painter and a ninja, too, but I think it’s best to let kids explore anything that interests them when they’re young.

We enjoyed our carving practice until the afternoon, when Lulu and I treated the gentleman and the other sculptors to a lavish meal.



“Wow, what an exotic-looking shop.”

After we left the sculptor’s workshop, we visited a company near the artisan district: the royal company branch of the Sahbe Company, run by the weaselfolk merchant Mr. Homimudory, where I’d made arrangements to purchase some scrolls.

Aside from Arisa and Mia, I sent the rest of the group to another shop on Coin Street: the sugar route traders who Nana’s sisters had imposed upon, shopping under the pretense of guarding Lulu.

Liza wanted to stay with me as my bodyguard, but I refused; truthfully, the main reason I was sending the rest of the group away was for Liza’s sake. She seemed uncomfortable around the weaselfolk since her hometown had been destroyed by them.

“Kinda scary.” Mia shivered and clutched herself.

“Yeah, it does have a lot of eastern-style carvings and decor, and very unusual colors.”

I patted Mia’s head and led the two inside.

“Hello there, youngsters. What can we do for you today?”

A human salesperson came running up to us.

He was addressing us like commoners, possibly because we hadn’t come in a carriage.

“Is Mr. Homimudory here today? I made arrangements to purchase some scrolls...”

I showed him my nobility badge as I explained my business.

“Oh dear, I’m terribly sorry. Please have a seat in here, Sir Knight. I’ll call for our president at once.”

Surprised by my badge, the salesperson quickly switched to a more formal attitude and led us to a reception room.

Then he hurried off to get Mr. Homimudory, leaving us in the care of a human female employee.

The majority of this firm’s employees were weaselfolk like Mr. Homimudory, but it appeared that they primarily employed humans for customer service.

We sipped on the sweet citrusy juice the employee brought us as we waited, and soon there was a polite knock at the door.

When I responded, the owner of the company, Mr. Homimudory himself, entered with an attendant.

“She-she-she, welcome, Sir Pendragon.”

Mr. Homimudory sat down politely, and the attendant produced several scrolls from an elegant box and placed them on the table. They all appeared to be labyrinth-made.

“Those ones are rather ominous-looking.”

“Mrr.”

As Arisa observed, two of the scrolls looked somewhat dangerous.

Both were Ghost Magic: Summon Lesser Undead, which could summon skeleton or zombie servants, and Summon Lesser Ghost, which summoned weak incorporeal undead monsters.

Neither were the sort of scrolls that could be legally bought or sold in the Shiga Kingdom.

Now I knew why Mr. Homimudory had requested that we make this deal separately and in person when I purchased Cherry Blossom Shower and other such scrolls from him through the explorers’ guild in Labyrinth City.

Still, I was a little unsure whether I should buy them or not. Ghost Magic

scrolls might not have been strictly illegal to own, but they were certainly suspicious.

The rest of the scrolls included the Earth Magic spell Cultivation, a composite spell Create House, the Summoning Magic spell Summon Bat from the Overgrown Labyrinth, the Practical Magic spell Rolling Gear from the Illusion Labyrinth, and Bonecraft from the Bloodsucker Labyrinth. This last one was normal-looking enough, but it was actually Ghost Magic like the first two.

The carved-bone earrings I'd given to Zena in Labyrinth City were actually unicorn horns that had been modified with the Bonecraft spell.

I definitely wanted this one, since it seemed useful for a lot of different things. Even if it meant I might seem a little suspicious.

Once the attendant finished explaining the scrolls, the negotiations began in earnest.

"These are quite intriguing. May I ask how much you were hoping to receive for them?"

"She-she-she, I'll leave the pricing in your hands, Sir Pendragon. You are a premier collector of scrolls, after all."

When I tried to get him to give me a price, he pushed it off on me instead.

Normally, lesser magic scrolls were about one gold coin apiece and intermediate magic scrolls around three. But when I bought scrolls like Cherry Blossom Shower from him, he priced them on the higher end of my estimated value, so I should probably offer the same.

"How about one hundred eighty gold coins for all seven?"

"Satou."

Mia made an X with her fingers and nodded toward the two more sinister scrolls.

"Master, Mia is right. It would be best not to buy scrolls that might stir up unseemly rumors among the other nobles."

"Good point."

Skeleton soldiers had been used in the attack on Vistall Duchy recently, which I got caught up in. If word got out that I bought a scroll that could summon skeletons, it could definitely cause some serious problems.

“Putting those two aside, then, how about one hundred twenty gold coins for the other five?”

“I would certainly never object to your good judgment, Sir Knight. I accept your offer.”

Just like that, the negotiation was over.

“Sir Knight, our company also carries other unusual goods from the Weaselman Empire. Would you like to see those as well?”

Since we were already here, I decided to take him up on that—after making sure it was okay with Arisa and Mia, of course.

Mr. Homimudory led us to a warehouse in the back.

“Ah, excuse me.”

“Not at all...”

On our way there, I almost collided with someone who was leaving the room.

It was a rather suspicious-looking person with deep shadows under his eyes.

Wait, what?!

Absentmindedly checking the AR display, I saw that he was a member of the Light of Freedom group—wait, no, I misread that. He belonged to the casual occult group Wind of Freedom, not the demon lord-worshipping cult Light of Freedom.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, he just looked like someone I know...”

I casually asked about the man while we walked and learned that he was the son of a greater noble and often came to buy specific kinds of items.

He was fond of clandestine actions and apparently took a liking to coming and going through the back entrance.

“This shelf has handicrafts from Dejima Island, and over there we have items brought back from the Illusion Labyrinth on Dejima Island as well.”

Mr. Homimudory explained the various products in the warehouse.

The first shelf was packed with vases in a similar style to Jomon pottery and other strange items. I didn't know good from bad when it came to such things, but they all had an exotic quality that made it fun just to browse.

On the other hand, the items from the labyrinth were mostly things like gears and bolts, which looked junky by comparison.

“Mrr.”

Staring at the shelves with a glazed look in her eye, Mia made a little displeased noise.

I followed her gaze to what looked like a lump of coal, and soon information appeared in my AR display.

“Whoa...,” I murmured in spite of myself.

“That is a talisman used by lesser warlocks, known as a curse stone.”

Overhearing me, Mr. Homimudory gave a similar explanation to the information I saw.

A warlock, he explained, was a Ghost Magic user who specialized in curses. They were mostly found in the Saga Empire and the western part of the continent.

“A talisman?”

“Yes, although low-grade talismans like that curse stone cannot do much more than make the victim's nose itchy. Nothing to worry about,” he assured us with a smile. The effect was a bit unsettling with his carnivorous teeth, though.

He went on to explain that this curse stone was produced in the Bloodsucker Labyrinth in the Saga Empire and that such objects were frequently sold to Wind of Freedom members like the one we met before.

At any rate, it seemed harmless enough. There was probably no need to worry about it.

Other than that, there weren't many items that particularly caught our attention. Since Arisa and Mia looked bored, I was just thinking about taking our leave when Mr. Homimudory appeared to pick up on the mood and offered to show us his best treasures of all.

"Are these golems?"

The storeroom Mr. Homimudory brought us to contained rows of golems. Aside from a box-shaped head that jutted out to their shoulders, they looked like the usual ten-foot-tall variety.

"Yes, indeed. However, they are not quite the usual kind of golems."

On Mr. Homimudory's command, a weaselfolk man in work clothes stepped onto a platform next to one of the golems and jumped up into its head.

The weaselman's hands moved inside the golem, and the golem moved accordingly.

"Is he controlling the golem from there?"

"Yes, that's correct." Mr. Homimudory smiled and nodded at Arisa.

Come to think of it, the prime minister did tell me that the weaselmens expanded their empire in the east by using armies of manned golems and "screws" that could forcibly control monsters.

This golem didn't appear to have any armor or weapons, so it was probably adapted from the combat models for heavy lifting and such.

"Would you like to try it for yourself, Sir Knight?"

"Yes, please."

"Me too! I wanna try!"

"Mrr?"

Mia didn't seem interested, but Arisa and I gladly walked up the steps to the platform next to the cockpit of the golem. A female employee led Mia away to look at some picture scrolls from Dejima Island.

"This seems like the kind of robot a future boy named Conan would use."

"True." I nodded in agreement with Arisa's reference to an old, famous

anime.

“There are so many levers, it’s like a crane or some other industrial machine.”

“Two levers at your feet, two levers on the left and right, and two foot pedals...maybe they’re for the expansion and output of the legs?”

“Si-si-si, more or, less, correct-like. <Very good,> child.”

Coming up to the platform, the weaselman praised Arisa’s wits with stilted speech.

The “very good” part alone was in the language of the Saga Empire. He must be more fluent in Sagan Language than Shigan.

He introduced himself as a mechanic and gave us a simple tutorial.

The foot pedals moved the golem forward when pushed, moved backward when pulled up, and stopped when released. While walking, the levers corresponding to the legs were unresponsive for safety purposes.

I decided to go first so I could make sure it was safe.

“Ooh, cool!”

Its response time was a little slow, but it was easy to get used to the simple controls.

I tried carrying around wooden crates and other simple movements.

“...Master! Heeey, master!”

Arisa seemed to be calling for me; I stopped and looked back at her.

“Geez, how long are you going to play around by yourself?!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Checking the clock in my menu, I realized I’d been messing around for well over ten minutes.

I guess I got carried away with the fun of piloting a robot.

There were pilotable golems in the elf village, too, but those moved based on verbal orders, which wasn’t quite as fun as controlling this kind with your own hands.

I brought the golem back to the platform and traded places with Arisa, then watched her settle into the cockpit as I enjoyed the pleasant breeze at the top of the platform.

“●●”

> Skill Acquired: “Weaselfolk Language”

Evidently, I had picked up a new skill just by hearing a voice from right outside the open entrance to the warehouse. I put in some skill points and activated it, just for kicks.

“<...ttack...steal... So decrees His Majesty the Emperor’s brother...>”

Hearing some rather suspicious-sounding phrases, I focused on my “Keen Hearing” skill.

The speaker was a robed weaselman mage. According to my AR display, he was level 31 and could use three kinds of magic: **Summoning Magic**, **Practical Magic**, and **Dark Magic**.

He seemed to be talking to Mr. Homimudory, the very merchant who had brought us here.

“<And even Parion Province, which is under the gods’—>”

“<That’s enough, Siporohhoy,>” Mr. Homimudory interrupted. “<It would be blasphemous for mere subjects like ourselves to guess at the intentions of His Majesty the Emperor’s brother.>”

The mage seemed to want to say more, but then he noticed my gaze, pulled the hood over his face, and left without another word. I guess even the weaselfolk nation had drama of its own.

While I had no intention of stirring up trouble by sticking my nose into their business, I certainly didn’t want to be caught by surprise if something bad happened, so I put a marker on the mage just in case.

“She-she-she, please pardon my rudeness.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Was that someone from your company?”

When Mr. Homimudory came back, I decided to ask a few questions about

the mage.

They'd obviously noticed me looking at them, at which point it would probably seem stranger not to ask any questions.

"Indeed. What about him?"

"Oh, I'd just never seen a weaselfolk mage before."

"I see, I see. Indeed, we beastfolk are sometimes too dismissive of magic."

Many beastfolk and scalefolk, including my trio of girls, tended to be physically stronger than most humans.

It seemed to be a common feeling among beastfolk that it was faster to run up and strike someone than stand around chanting magic.

"At any rate, did you enjoy trying the piloted golem?"

"Yes, it was excellent. Are they very common in the Weaselman Empire?"

It was very satisfying to pilot a robot.

Maybe I should make one myself sometime.

"They were developed just a few decades ago by His Majesty the current Emperor before he was enthroned. These small golems are for light-duty work, but the military sort are some three times larger."

As I suspected, that golem wasn't for military use. The military ones sounded like they were around the same size as the Shiga Kingdom variety.

"We could hardly bring military golems into another nation, of course," Mr. Homimudory added. "Would you like to reserve one yourself, Sir Knight? It can be delivered as soon as a year or two from now."

They already had ten or so orders from especially wealthy noble families, he informed me.

I was amazed they could buy such things, considering that they probably made Magic Swords look cheap by comparison.

There were several more rows of golems beyond where Arisa was gleefully piloting one. Mr. Homimudory did tell me at the garden party that the Marionette Cores required to make golems could be found in the labyrinth on

Dejima Island; perhaps these golems were one of the Weaselman Empire's primary exports.

"Master! Did you see my heroic display?"

"Yes, you were very cool."

While we were discussing such things, Arisa returned from her test drive. Then we reconvened with Mia and left Mr. Homimudory's company.

"Master! There's lots of baked sweets, sir."

"Yummy dried fruits, tooo...?"

"The dried fish was delicious as well."

When we met up with the rest of the group at the sugar route traders' place, the beastfolk girls were preoccupied with their love of all things sweet and savory.

"Master, the accessories were tiny and soft and cute, I report."

"They were selling castor sugar and crystallized sugar, too. And they said they sell rum by the cask or bottle."

Nana was more interested in accessories, while Lulu told me about their ingredients.

"Let's stock up on some things while we have the chance, then. Arisa and Mia, you should see if there's anything you want, too."

"Mm, fun."

"I'm interested in their books, of course, but I'd like to check out fabrics and dyes and such, too."

Arisa and Mia eagerly headed over to the shelves.

Since I was already planning to buy a lot in order to make up for the damage Nana's sisters caused with plenty of room for them to profit, I bought lots of the foreign goods the girls took an interest in.

After we enjoyed plenty of shopping, we made our way to the Echigoya Company next.



“All right, we’re going to talk business for a bit. You all can do some more shopping.”

I distributed spending money to the rest of the group before leaving them at the stairs of the jam-packed Echigoya Company store.

The only two coming with me were Arisa, the planning director, and Lulu, the cookery expert.

“Sir Knight, it’s a pleasure to see you.”

A beautiful silver-haired girl came partway down the stairs to greet us: Tifaleeza, Kuro’s slave and the managing secretary of the company’s accounting affairs. Her cool and clever face was lovely as always.

It’d be great if I could set her free from slavery soon, but since she was a criminal slave, it was impossible to break the contract by normal means. A royal pardon was required.

I’ll have to see if I can get the king to issue a pardon next time I see him.

“I’ve consolidated the idea collection survey we talked about last time,” said Arisa. “And Lulu brought a brand-new recipe to knock your socks off.”

“Lulu’s cookin’ up a new recipe?! Oh man, I can’t wait!”

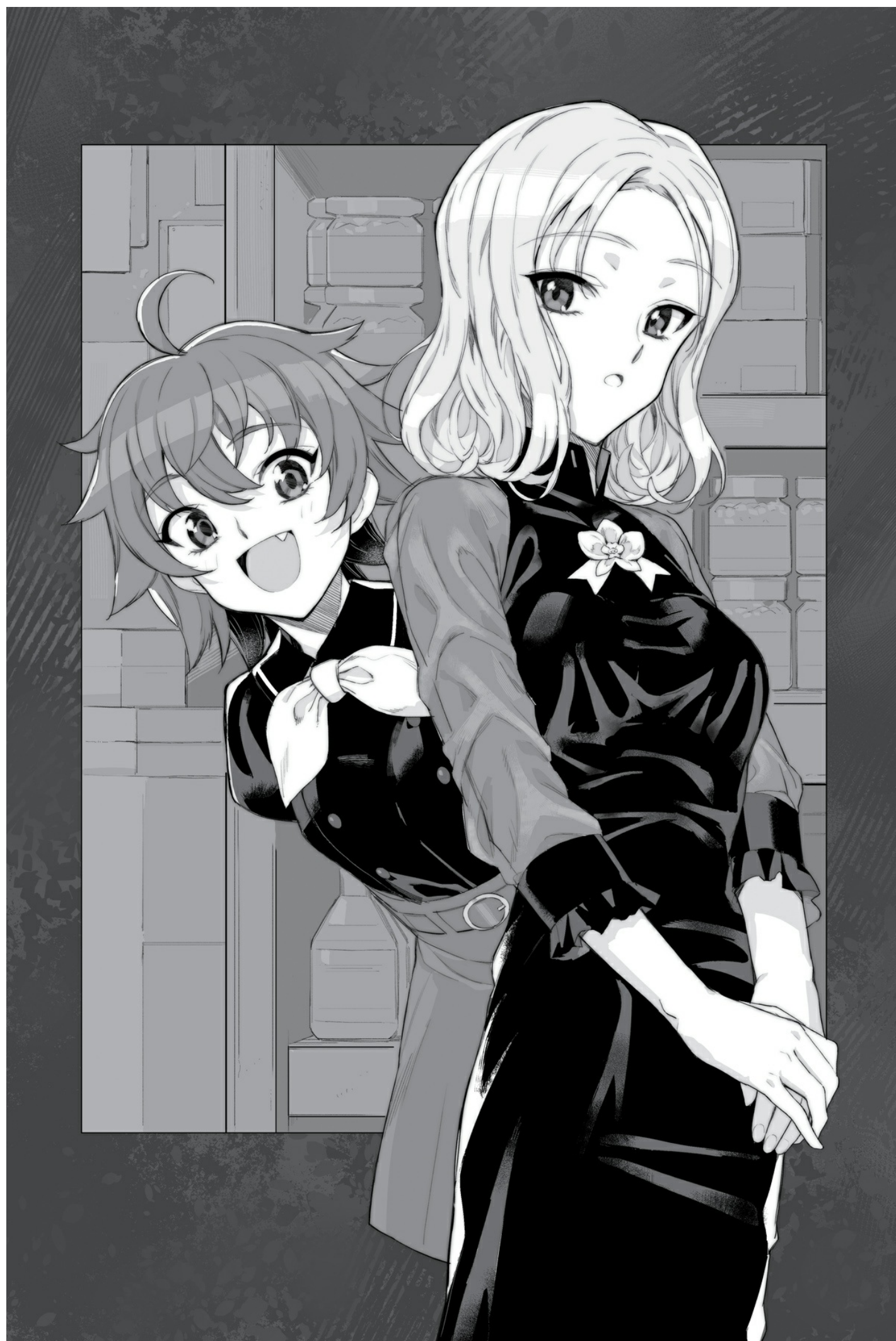
On the second floor, a red-haired girl in an employee’s uniform barged into the conversation.

It was Neru, with her signature tuft of hair sticking up adorably from the top of her head. She was still a slave for the same reason as Tifaleeza; I’d have to remember her, too, when I spoke to the king about issuing pardons.

“Hello, Ms. Neru. Have you transferred to the royal capital?”

“Sure did! Ms. Eluterina asked me to come help out with the whole café frankfurdora thing they’re doin’ here.”

“Nice try, but only the first syllable was right. You mean ‘franchise.’”



Neru had apparently been brought here from Labyrinth City for the café franchising project Arisa proposed.

“Neru, you can talk their ears off later. Sir Knight and company need to talk to the manager first.”

“Whoops, am I gettin’ in the way again? Sorry, Tifa. See ya later, Lulu!”

Without waiting for a response, Neru bounded cheerfully back to work. That girl was always full of energy.

“It’s pretty packed here today.”

“It certainly is. Is there some special occasion, Ms. Tifaleeza?”

“Well, everyone who’s having a coming-of-age ceremony this coming year has been clamoring for accessories to go with their formal wear for the occasion.”

The coming-of-age ceremony took place on New Year’s Day here, it seemed.

Flashy decorations were in fashion this year, which meant the gaudy accessories made in Labyrinth City were all the rage.

“You’ll be coming of age soon, too, won’t you, Lulu?”

“Yes, I’ll be fifteen this New Year’s Day.”

“Your birthday is on New Year’s?”

“Birthday, sir?” Lulu asked.

Something about this conversation wasn’t quite clicking.

“Master, they don’t have a custom of celebrating the day you were born here,” Arisa explained, catching on to my confusion. “For the most part, everyone just adds a year to their age on New Year’s Day.”

Aah, gotcha. So that’s why no one’s birthday has come up even though we’ve been traveling together for almost a full year.

“Most people only celebrate when they turn seven and when they reach adulthood at fifteen, too.”

“I see. We’ll have to celebrate Lulu’s coming of age this year, then.”

A beautiful long-sleeved kimono was a given; I’d have to flex my maxed-out

“Metalworking” skill to make a hairpin ornate enough to match Lulu’s beauty, too.

Tifaleeza offered her congratulations as well, after which we moved to a drawing room.

“Goodness, this is delicious.”

“It really is.”

When Manager Eluterina and Tifaleeza sampled the broiled eel with ant-honey sauce Lulu had prepared, they gave it their stamp of approval.

“But this sweetness...it must be sugar, no?”

“Don’t worry. I used ant honey, which is much cheaper than sugar.”

For the time being, we planned to provide them with some of the huge stock of ant honey we had acquired in the labyrinth.

“Ant honey? We had better not serve it to nobles, then.”

“I prepared a recipe that uses sugar for noble clientele, too.”

“Amazing, Ms. Lulu. You always come prepared.”

Many Shiga Kingdom nobles looked down on ingredients that came from monsters.

That said, we had developed the sugar-based recipe first and then adapted it with this ant honey, not the other way around.

Once we decided on a price for the recipe, Lulu ended up agreeing to instruct the Echigoya chefs in cooking it right away.

“Lady Lulu!” A bearded man in a chef’s outfit came running in. “Oh, goodness! It really is you!”

“E-erm...”

“But of course, you do not remember. The head chef instructed me to assist you in the duke’s castle some time ago.”

“Ah! Aah, I do remember!”

That seemed to bring back Lulu’s memory.

The man said that when he tried the food at the Labyrinth City street carts, he immediately sensed that it was Lulu's recipe and came running to the Echigoya Company to ask for a job.

"Nothing could be more thrilling than learning from the personal pupil of the Miracle Chef!"

"Hold it! The first person who gets instruction from Ms. Master Lulu is gonna be her top student, Neru!" The redheaded Neru popped up in an apron.

Like the bearded chef, she appeared to want to study under Lulu.

"Hmph, can you really call yourself Ms. Master Lulu's top student when you are self-taught in even the fundamentals of cooking?"

The nickname "Ms. Master Lulu" appeared to be sticking.

Better than "Personal Pupil of the Miracle Chef," I guess.

"All right, let's go, Ms. Master Lulu."

"Indeed, this is no time to stand around arguing. Ms. Master Lulu, let us make haste to the kitchen."

Neru and the bearded man pressed Lulu out of the room.

"I hope those two don't get out of hand and stress Ms. Lulu out..."

"I'll go with them, Manager."

"Really? Thank you."

If Tifaleeza was watching, I would feel much better.

"At any rate, I get that he adores Lulu as the 'personal pupil of the Miracle Chef,' but why wouldn't he be more interested in the Miracle Chef himself?" Arisa raised her eyebrows.

I shrugged. "We've never met face-to-face. Maybe he just doesn't know who I am?"

The manager, Eluterina, chuckled, perhaps thinking the same thing as Arisa.

"Manager, we brought the underwear prototypes!"

Louna, the short girl who rode around on a stone fox golem, entered the

room. She seemed as fond of her chosen steed as ever.

“Wow, you already made samples of the bra and panties?”

“It’s all thanks to the patterns you gave us, Arisa.”

The samples were still a bit rough, but identifiable nonetheless.

They had used an empty space in the spinning mill to set up a sewing workshop for making underwear.

I hadn’t come to visit the Echigoya Company as Kuro in the past few days, even though we were here in the royal capital; I had better visit them soon.

“So I have a pitch for a new product...”

Arisa showed them the sample stockings and began her presentation.

Before long, everyone had agreed to add stockings to the Echigoya Company product lineup.

I presented them with the results of my all-nighter: modified alchemy and spells, recipes, and a magic device for sewing up stockings.

“This is quite an unusual magic device.”

“I’m told it’s in the style of ancient Lalakie.”

Arisa had borrowed the washing machine–size magic device from the elves’ sewing workshop.

I used my “Disguise” skill to make the outside look like an old-fashioned Lalakie device.

“Are you certain you don’t mind lending us such a valuable item?”

“Yes, it’s fine. We acquired all kinds of magic tools when we traveled the sugar route, and this one is a bit too large for us to use alone. I would rather it be with people who will use it properly.”

It was a somewhat roundabout response, but that was all part of trying to disguise its origins, which was also why I’d made it look like an antique from Lalakie.

As much as I trusted Manager Eluterina, I wanted to make sure no third

parties caught wind of it and went to bother the elves about similar devices.

After the business talks, I moved on to asking for some more personal advice.

“Private tutors and servants...?”

“Yes, I’d like to hire a teacher to instruct my kids in manners and a few employees to take care of chores in our royal capital mansion.”

“I’ve got just the list for you.”

The manager called for one of the noble executive girls and sent her to get a “yellow binder.”

“It’s a list of people who were employed as maids in the Lessau County castle, noble manors, and so on. We would’ve liked to hire them ourselves, but I’m afraid it’s a bit complicated...”

She was probably being careful because of the circumstances of girls like Tifaleeza and Neru.

Most of them were currently working side jobs, or at the spinning mill that had recently reopened.

“There aren’t any weird strings attached, are there?”

“No, I’ve already made sure of that.”

The list included their places of origin and most recent jobs, and even a simple work history, whether they discriminated against demi-humans, and so on.

I picked six or so names from the list, interviewed a middle-aged veteran maid named Tenmarya as our head maid, and hired her on the spot to come work for us the next day. There were a few promising candidates for teaching and gardening who I hired as well.

Instead of hiring an exclusive coachman, I made a contract with one from the coachman’s guild for a month or so, complete with a carriage. I thought about using a carriage from Storage and making some horse golems with the Earth Magic spell Create Earth Servant but decided that would draw too much attention.

“Monsters in the royal capital...?”

While we waited for Lulu to return, Ms. Manager mentioned this in conversation.

I'd heard some nobles talking about that at the garden party, too.

"Yes, although it hasn't been confirmed directly...there have been reports of homeless people being found dead in a terrible state in the lower part of the city, and the torso of a ratfolk merchant was discovered in the sewers."

There were also rumors about a monsterlike shadow attacking people, traces of suspicious rituals being found in abandoned buildings, and so on.

"There have been several incidents with demon lord revivals and monster attacks in the past six months or so, and rumors like this often go around this time of year leading up to an Evil-Cleansing Ceremony, but..."

"If they're finding bodies, then obviously *something's* going on," Arisa supplied.

She shot me a look that probably meant "*Find out what's happening,*" but just like when I checked during the garden party, I couldn't find anything suspicious on the map.

There weren't any dangerous creatures like the giant alligators that lived in the sewers of the old capital, only rats and bats.

"I've heard that the guards suspect it might be a creature or ghoul summoned by a monster summoner or necromancer, a chimera made by an alchemist, or perhaps a tamed monster that's escaped."

A monster summoner... I remembered the weaselman mage I'd seen at the Sahbe Company.

Although he certainly seemed suspicious, it was probably a bit too much of a leap to suggest him as a suspect just because he could use Summoning Magic.

If anything, this seemed more like the work of a demon, but that wasn't listed as one of the options.

"That's a lot of contenders."

Disturbingly enough, there was apparently a betting pool among some of the more unscrupulous guards about which of those was responsible for the

incidents.

“By the way, what’s an Evil-Cleansing Ceremony?”

“You’ve never heard of it, Arisa? It’s a ritual in which they collect all the miasma from the royal capital and surrounding areas into holy vessels, then priestesses from all seven temples purify it all at once,” the manager explained. “It clears out the monsters from the vicinity of the capital, since they don’t like places without miasma.”

I had just learned about it recently, but the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony was evidently held twice a year, using items like a Holy Grail or Holy Chalice to magically drive monsters out of the royal capital and its surrounding areas. This time, it would be done with the royal family’s Holy Grail and the dukes’ Holy Chalice, a bigger version of the ceremony that was only done once every six years and was sometimes even called the Big Clean.

Since this ceremony wiped out all the monsters in the area, the royal capital was able to maintain agricultural fields far larger than most other places. It probably helped that the outer border of the farmland was surrounded by barrier posts to prevent monsters from reentering.

“Isn’t that dangerous? I would think it’d attract monsters when they gather all that miasma.”

“It’s perfectly safe. The patrolling knights and Wyvern Riders will be on high alert, and the miasma evaporates before the monsters can approach, so it’s rare for monsters to even come into view of the royal capital.”

The royal capital native seemed quite confident in the safety of the ceremony.

“Gotcha. Thanks for the explanation, Ms. Eluterina. Sorry for derailing the conversation...” Arisa brought back the original subject, mentioning Mr. Homimudory’s company. “Oh, right. You said a weaselman merchant was killed—was it someone from the Sahbe Company?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Ms. Manager nodded, then turned to me. “Why, could it be that you’re in business with the Sahbe Company, Sir Knight?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I just purchased some scrolls from them,” I answered truthfully. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, it’s just that the Sahbe Company deals in products that are forbidden in the Shiga Kingdom. I wanted to be sure you hadn’t purchased any without knowing.”

“Thank you for the warning.”

I would have to be careful, since they seemed to have some gray-area products that could be mistaken for illegal items, too.

I did buy the Bonecraft scroll, but it didn’t look particularly dangerous, nor did I plan on showing it off to anyone. Hopefully it would be fine.

“But if it’s known that they deal in illegal products, why haven’t they been reported to the authorities?” Arisa asked.

“Because the Sahbe Company has the backing of some powerful nobles. The law only makes sure they limit their dealings to private places. If they try to do anything more than that, the company will get out of it.”

This was only for gray-area items like the curse stone, though; if they were selling highly illegal drugs like demonic potions or corpse potions, proof would be enough to get them in serious trouble.

Just then, Lulu and Neru returned.

“Somethin’ about the Sahbe Company?” Neru asked.

“Just that they sell some dangerous items.”

“Yeah? Figured as much. I always see sketchy people comin’ and goin’ through the back entrance there.”

Neru added that there was a delicious food cart near the Sahbe Company.

The “sketchy people” she mentioned were probably members of that casual occult group Wind of Freedom.



“It’s still a little early to go home,” Arisa remarked.

“Want to go to the fountain plaza nearby, then?”

Lulu proposed a spot that Neru had told her about.

It sounded like a fun place, with street performers, caricature artists, and plenty of food carts.

“Aah, look! That must be the place, right?”

“Master, destination sighted up ahead, I report.”

It didn't take long to reach the fountain plaza.

Our carriage would've taken us all the way there, but since that wouldn't be as fun, we got off a little ways away and walked there together.

“Gwaaaaah!”

As we were strolling along, a young man came tumbling out of an alleyway with a yell.

For some reason, a crow was pecking at his head.

“D-damn you, black-feathered beast!”

“H-how dare you harm our friend!”

A few men who appeared to be the first man's friends came running out after him. Their words sounded brave and all, but they were sweating like mad and wheezing so hard I thought they might collapse at any moment.

“Preeey...?”

“We captured Mr. Crow, sir.”

Tama and Pochi caught the crow and came back, its victim trailing behind them.

“Th-thank you for the help.”

The young man was holding what appeared to be a crow's feather.

He must have tried to pluck it from the crow and got attacked in retaliation.

He asked for the crow back, so I gave it to him in exchange for two copper coins as a reward to Tama and Pochi for catching it. They could buy some meat skewers or something later.

“Comrades! We have taken another step closer to realizing our ambitions!”

“Indeed, now we will be able to commune with the dark god!”

I seriously doubt there's any god you can contact with a single crow feather.

"Now our ranking in the secret society Wind of Freedom will surely rise. It was worth doing battle with the black-feathered beast."

It's not much of a secret society if you go around saying its name in broad daylight...

No wonder the guildmaster called Wind of Freedom a casual group.

We parted ways with the nerdy occult lovers, who were still lost in their own world, and continued our stroll.

"Smells like sobaaa...?"

"No meat-filled galettes, sir."

"There's a cart selling grilled sakura salmon fillet, too."

The food-loving beastfolk girls were immediately entranced by the food carts.

We decided to purchase some snacks and eat them as we walked.

"Sakura."

The path to the fountain was lined with cherry blossom trees.

"They're starting to bud here and there."

"Mm. Exciting."

It would be a while yet until they bloomed, but I was looking forward to having a flower-viewing party with everyone when the time came.

"There's more people than I expected," Lulu remarked, looking around at the bustling passersby.

"Crowded," Mia agreed.

"Well, yeah. A fountain that big is bound to draw a lot of sightseers."

Arisa pointed at the towering fountain beyond the crowds of people.

The fountain plaza we were headed toward was one of eight large fountains found throughout the royal capital, and it was the most popular of those in the areas that commoners and lesser nobles could visit.

Each of the fountainheads at the center was carved into a different statue.

The statues moved at regular intervals with the chime of bells; it might be worth checking out the other ones after this, too.

Naturally, there were pickpockets and gropers to be found in a crowd like this, but the beastfolk girls and I made quick work of them. I raised the magnification of my radar to a radius of around a hundred feet so I could easily identify miscreants in the crowd.

“Whoo! How nostalgic!”

Arisa gave a cry of delight at a beastfolk street performer who was using a flute to control a snake in a basket.

Nostalgic? Were there performers like this in Arisa’s hometown?

“Wrigglyyy...?”

“It’s Mr. Broiled Eel, sir!”

The snake somehow reminded Pochi of broiled eel.

We had just eaten some snacks from the food carts; evidently, Pochi’s appetite knew no limits.

Maybe I should make some eel—or rather, naga—for dinner tonight.

As I started getting lost in thought about what to make for side dishes, the excited voices of my party reached my ears.

“It’s shooting up in the air like *peeew*, sir!”

“Wonderfuuul...?”

“Stay back, you two, or you’ll fall into the fountain.”

“It reminds me of Mia’s magic, I declare.”

“Mm?”

“I wonder if they have a tradition of throwing in a copper coin for luck here?”

“Don’t be silly, Arisa. Money isn’t a toy.”

The girls seemed to be enjoying the sights of the fountain. There was one at the park we’d visited just a few days ago, too, but I couldn’t blame them for

getting excited, since this one was on a much bigger scale.

“It’s pretty, although the little spray of water is really cold. I bet they’d love something like this in Labyrinth City.”

“Yeah, really. But how would that work, I wonder? Water is a pretty valuable resource there.”

“It could just spray at particular times and be a place for drawing water otherwise.”

Hmm. If we made one in the plaza in front of the west guild, it could be a good sightseeing spot and rest area for explorers.

“Satou.”

Mia tugged on my sleeve. I looked where she pointed and saw several carriages stopped on the other side of the fountain, one of which was especially fancy.

Peering out the window of the fancier carriage was Athena, the pink-haired Sakura Protector we’d met at the base of the Royal Sakura Tree. The glasses-wearing Princess Sistina and her two ladies-in-waiting were inside as well.

They must be here to see the fountain together.

There were six female guards on horseback protecting the carriage. They all wore gleaming armor, befitting the bodyguards of a princess.

Just then, the bells that marked the time throughout the royal capital began to ring out.

“Waaah, amazing! Look, Arisa! Master, too—it’s beautiful!”

Lulu got my attention in a voice a full octave higher than usual, and I closed the window of detailed information that blocked my view.

Oooh.

My eyes were fixed immediately on the spectacle in front of me.

I don’t know if it was Water Magic, Practical Magic, or something else entirely, but the water all around the fountain began floating in defiance of gravity, forming rings in the air.

Then the fountain itself sprayed up through the rings.

The circles of water flew up higher into the air with the spray of the fountain, then disintegrated in a rainbow of sparkles.

Moments later, the nozzles below the surface all started spraying more water up into the rainbow light, forming arches that blossomed around the fountain at the center.

The falling spray turned into the shape of petals, dancing in the air over the plaza like a storm of cherry blossoms.

The stone statues underneath danced around with comical motions.

What a fantastical sight.

I hadn't expected there to be magical components in addition to the mechanical movements.

Still holding on to my sleeve, Lulu gazed at the scene in silent wonder.

The rest of the group were equally entranced, watching the water change shape and color as if their hearts had been stolen away.

...Okay, Mia and Pochi. I get how you feel, but you shouldn't let your mouths hang open.

I reached out and gently closed the pair's mouths.

The Red-Rope Monsters

Satou here. In console games and such, sometimes enemies strengthen themselves with Support Magic in order to teach the player how to use it. It's an effective tutorial, but if the support is too strong, it can have the unwanted side effect of making players really hate that particular enemy.

“...Mew?”

Tama's ears perked up sharply, and she looked around.

“What's the matter, T...?”

...Red lights.

While I was gazing in admiration at the fountain, multiple red dots had appeared on the radar in my AR display. Monsters.

Just as I noticed this, violent tremors rocked the ground beneath my feet, sending waves through the fountain and the cobblestones.

“Whoa, what's going on?!”

“It's an emergency, sir!”

Though startled, the rest of my group looked around without missing a beat, producing their weapons from their Fairy Packs. They didn't unsheathe them just yet, as there were throngs of people milling about in confusion all around us.

I didn't see any monsters approaching to match the red dots—they must be underground!

“Everyone, get away from the fountain!”

I used several skills to amplify my voice and give an order to evacuate.

In all the confusion, there were screams of rage or fear from the crowd, but

they still quickly followed my command and started running away. Maybe that was thanks to my “Negotiation” and “Direction” skills.

Several of the carriages on the other side of the fountain were still unable to leave, including the one containing Princess Sistina.

It appeared they couldn’t move, either because their horses had panicked, the wheels of the cart had gotten caught in the upturned cobblestones, or the other carriages were in the way.

“Master, the fountain!” Liza cried.

Indeed, where just seconds ago there had been a beautiful water show, the fountain had stopped for just a moment; a second later, it was spraying leaked water everywhere, soaking the carriages and people who had yet to run away.

A moment later, the structure of the fountain collapsed, and the bottom of the pool gave way, revealing thin black wirelike tentacles wriggling up toward the surface.

“Master, monsters located in the direction of two o’clock. Requesting permission to eliminate.”

“Evacuation is the top priority! Nana and Liza, keep the monsters contained so they don’t try to attack anyone! Pochi and Tama, help anyone who hasn’t gotten away yet.”

“Yes, master.”

“Understood!”

“Roger, sir!”

“Aye-aye, sir...?”

As the vanguard leaped into action, strange cricket-like monsters began to appear. They were about the size of a medium dog, with distinctive red markings coiled around their black bodies like snakes.

“Monsterrrrrs!”

“They’re gonna eat ussss!”

“Run awaaaaay!”

The people who hadn't escaped yet or were standing nearby watching all started panicking and running away at top speed.

Their screams attracted the monsters' attention, but Liza and Nana kept them from giving chase.

"Arisa and Mia, magic support. Lulu, protect Arisa and Mia, please."

"Yes, of course!" Lulu activated her shield bracelet.

"Okey-dokey!"

"Mm."

Arisa and Mia, too, readied their staffs.

Once I was done giving orders, I kept an eye on my companions while opening the map to double-check the surrounding area.

I didn't notice right away because I was enraptured by the fountain, but still, there hadn't been any monsters on my radar even moments before that.

Teleportation or Summoning? I had to investigate how these monsters were called into being in the middle of the royal capital, especially if we wanted to keep sightseeing in peace.

There were still about fifteen monsters prowling around in the sewers below.

"I activated Tactical Talk! The enemies are mutant crickets of some kind, level 10!"

Arisa used Space Magic to make an information network that only our group could hear.

"These things have a strange condition called 'Monster Rope Wrap'! It's a support skill I've never heard of, which means it might have some kind of countereffect. Be careful!"

"Understood."

"Yes, Arisa."

Liza threw an experimental feint to test the waters, and red light flashed on the monster.

As soon as Liza's spear touched it, red ropes appeared to form a magic circle on the cricket's surface, but Liza's spear broke the circle and sent it scattering in a spray of red light. It must be some kind of barrier.

"It felt like a defensive spell of some sort, around as strong as Nana's Shield," reported Liza.

"That sounds pretty tough," Arisa muttered.

Hmm?

The monsters on my map started moving more intensely.

"They're doing something strange. Watch out!"

Just as I gave a warning, the crickets all jumped out at once.

They were strangely fast for level-10 monsters. Several of them managed to break through Liza and Nana's line of defense.

"Swift Death to Eviil...?"

"Lightning Flash, sir!"

Tama and Pochi, who were helping people evacuate, speedily defeated the monsters.

For the monsters that weren't near those two, I grabbed them with the magical telekinesis spell Magic Hand and smashed them into the ground. Since Arisa and Mia were busy chanting, hopefully any witnesses would assume it was their magic.

Then one of the crickets I'd dropped started to jump again toward the princess's carriage.

I had smashed them into the ground hard enough to finish off any normal monster of that level, yet the crickets' "Monster Rope Wrap" seemed to not only protect them from slashing attacks but enhanced their impact absorption as well.

"Protect Her Highness!"

The imperial knights fended off the cricket with their kite shields.

I assumed at first that they were mostly for show, since they were all noble

girls, but their reactions were very impressive.

“Sofla, Rielle, destroy those monsters! The rest of you, prioritize protecting the princess!”

The captain of the princess’s guards was level 30, and the rest were respectably in the low to mid 20s.

Meanwhile, although these monsters had that unfamiliar race-specific inherent skill “Monster Rope Wrap,” they were still only level 10. Even if this skill was specialized for battle, the knights should be able to hold their own.

Besides...

“..... ***Mud Capture Doro Shibaru!***”

Ms. Athena, Sakura Protector and member of the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves, used Earth Magic to change the ground beneath the rest of the crickets into mud, preventing them from jumping again. On top of that, the mud wrapped around the monsters and pinned them to the ground.

“Good one, Sakura Protector!” the captain called, praising Athena. “Hold them down until we finish them off, please!”

It had looked at first like the two knights would kill the crickets instantly, but they were struggling more than expected.

“These monsters are nothing! I’ll destroy them with my Earth Magic!”

“...All right. If you think you can do it, go for it! Ann, Renoa, help those two out.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the captain gave Athena permission.

She also added two more knights from the princess’s guard, one with a longsword and one with a mace, to join the front lines against the crickets.

“.....  ***Toss Beryl Midori Rokuchuu Sekijun!***”

When Athena finished her chant, emerald-green stalagmites rose up from the mud and pierced the crickets’ stomachs.

No, wait—that only killed two of them. The last one was pushed out of the Mud Capture spell by the Toss Beryl spell and escaped.

“Wh-what?! But my Toss Beryl can pierce even knights’ armor! How could it survive that?!”

“Get behind me, Your Highness! Fahfa, watch the rear!”

Ignoring Athena’s cry that was somehow also a brag, the knight captain began retreating with the princess, who’d gotten down from the carriage.

Maybe I should help them out a little.

The cricket that had escaped the Mud Capture jumped toward the princess.

“..... **Splash Needle Suikenzan.**”

I heard a cool voice from beside me, and countless sharp spikes of water appeared from the puddles that slicked the ground, piercing the cricket from below. It was Mia’s intermediate Water Magic.

The red-rope pattern attempted to protect the cricket, but the water needles went through it like paper.

“Master, looks like that thing was chasing the crickets forward.”

Arisa pointed at a bull-size rat monster called a “giant mutant rat.” Liza and Nana had already brought it down.

“How long are you going to keep messing around?!” The captain bellowed at the knights. It appeared that they still hadn’t finished defeating the first cricket.

The knights responded by attacking the cricket more fiercely and finally broke through its red-rope barrier. Then they used the advantage of numbers to cut the cricket’s legs and crush its back and head to finally defeat it.

The “Monster Rope Wrap” seemed to be difficult to break through without the help of something like “Spellblade” or the Practical Magic spell Break Magic.

“Satou.”

Mia had found a strange creature nearby in the shadows.

Secretly watching the chaos was a small black figure with bat wings, not unlike the palm-size gargoyles I sometimes employed.

According to my AR display, it was a **level-1 imp**, with the skill “**Minor Hex.**” It seemed to be a kind of demon. Its title read **Familiar**, but the field where the

owner's name should be was blocked with strange letters. It must be some kind of concealment technique.

The whole thing was very suspicious; I put a marker on it and let it escape, hoping it would lead me to its master.

“Preeey...?”

“It got away, sir!”

Tama and Pochi returned from helping with the evacuation and spotted the imp.

When it saw the two girls coming, the imp fled with comedic panic.

“Sergeant Pochi, Sergeant Tama, follow that imp, but not fast enough to catch up to it.”

“Aye-aye, sir...”

“Roger, sir!”

Using their well-honed skills from playing tag with children, the pair ran off after the imp at the perfect speed.

A carriage appeared at the intersection, bearing the mark of the Parion Temple.

■■■■ Force Shot Hourikidama.

An invisible bullet shot out of the window of the carriage and pierced the imp.
GYWAAAAWN.

With a howl, the imp turned into a puff of black smoke and vanished.

“Too baaad...?”

“Something got it, sir.”

Tama and Pochi skidded to a halt in front of the temple carriage, looking up at whoever had defeated the imp.

The door opened, and out stepped the cardinal of Parion Province.

“Sorry, did I steal your big moment by mistake?”

“Mew.”

“I-it’s fine, sir.”

“Glad to hear it, then.”

The cardinal walked over to Tama and Pochi as they stepped back, patting their heads and asking, “Were you hurt at all?” in a gentle voice.

Pochi’s tail hid between her legs, and Tama’s ears lay flat; maybe they were just uncomfortable around such important people. I left Liza and Nana to keep an eye on the fountain and went over to rescue the young duo.

Oh, wait. First...

Pretending to investigate the rift in the broken fountain, I fired Remote Arrow into the hole leading to the sewers below, aiming to wipe out any surviving crickets that still lurked beneath. It’d be dangerous if they jumped out to the surface and caused further chaos.

When I looked up, the cardinal was already walking away from Tama and Pochi, heading toward the princess and her entourage.

“Your Eminence! Please wait!”

A priest chased after the cardinal, looking harried about the hem of the latter’s long robe getting dirtied by the mud seeping out from the cobblestones.

The cardinal seemed unconcerned about his clothes, walking elegantly as if the ground wasn’t broken beneath him.

“Your Highness and company, are any of you injured?”

“We deeply appreciate your concern. However, I could not possibly ask you to trouble yourself for the likes of us, Your Grace.”

It was the knight captain who answered, not the princess; perhaps it was customary for royalty not to speak directly to others.

“H-how insolent! To reject His Grace’s benevolence—”

The priest started to object to the captain’s words, but the cardinal stopped him in a calm voice. “Enough, Father Stunk.”

“Ms. Athena, please heal the others.”

“Y-yes, ma’am! ■■■■...”

On the captain’s orders, Athena began the chant for Earth Heal.

“I see, so you have a talented young member of the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves with you.”

In spite of the obvious rejection, the cardinal seemed unruffled.

Tama and Pochi ran over and clung to my legs.

“Are any of you brave warriors in need of healing?”

“Thank you very much, but none of us are injured.”

“I should have expected no less from the ‘untouchable’ Pendragon party.”

Apparently, the cardinal had heard of us.

The cardinal grinned like a mischievous child, winking in a way that only a handsome man can pull off. Behind him, Arisa grinned and whispered something about “Lawrence X Satou.”

“Well then, until we meet again.”

Nodding at me, the cardinal turned and walked toward the crowd that was peering at us from afar.

Presumably, he was going to heal them. None were seriously injured, but many of them had minor wounds and scratches.

“You there. Call the guards,” the knight captain said to me.

She probably didn’t want to send any of her knights and decrease the princess’s guard.

“All right.”

I sent Nana to find the guards.

Since my map showed they were already aware of the situation and on their way, I used Tactical Talk to guide Nana toward the route they were taking toward us.

Then I told Liza there were no other immediate threats and checked the bodies of the monsters.

“Master, may I collect the cores?”

“No, let’s hold off. They were very unusual monsters—the guards might want to take them.”

“Nyuuu!”

“Even our meat?!”

Tama and Pochi, who were peeking at the rat monster, jumped up in surprise.

“We can’t eat a sewer rat, you two. It might have some seriously nasty germs.”

“Gerrrms...?”

“Scary, sir?”

Wincing, Arisa began lecturing the pair about hygiene. I would have to stop her if she got too carried away.

“Hmm... It’s definitely not tough enough to defend against my Toss Beryl. It must have been that strange red barrier that blocked my magic...”

Athena, the girl with pink hair, was going around inspecting the monster corpses.

“But this one that was killed by Water Magic...amazing, it pierced all the way through. It’s such a tiny hole, but it broke through the barrier that blocked my Toss Beryl and the monster’s whole body easily. There must be some kind of secret!”

“Spiral.” Mia, who had tottered over to Athena as the girl inspected the traces of her magic, explained her technique.

“Spiral? ...Oh, I see! There’s a screw-shaped pattern at the point where the monster was pierced! So that’s the secret!”

Athena turned around with a smile, until her face froze when she saw who had given her the hint.

“Mm. Pierces better and farther.”

Though she looked suspicious of Athena’s expression, Mia nonetheless explained the effects of the secret Athena had spotted.

“Misanaria of Bolenan!”

“Just ‘Mia.’”

While Athena’s voice was full of obvious hostility, Mia sounded decidedly unbothered.

“Y-you may have gotten the best of me this time, but that doesn’t mean human Earth Magic lost! I was just inexperienced, that’s all!” Athena’s eyes filled with frustrated tears.

Mia just blinked at her. “Wrong.”

“It’s not wrong! I’m still just a novice.”

“Right...”

Mia nodded, and Athena’s eyes got even tearier, threatening to spill over.

“Mia, you’ve got to learn to explain yourself more.”

“Mrr?”

Arisa stepped in to the rescue.

“When Mia said ‘wrong,’ she meant the part about ‘human Earth Magic lost.’”

“Huh...?”

Athena looked so bewildered by Arisa’s explanation that I could almost see a question mark hovering over her head.

“Because Mia’s Splash Needle spell was made by mas... I mean, a human.”

She must have remembered partway through her sentence that I wasn’t public about the fact that I could create new spells.

“There’s nothing wrong with being inexperienced. You might not know it from looking at her, but Mia’s over one hundred and thirty years old. If you keep working hard, you’ll catch up to her someday.”

“That’s right!” Athena looked convinced by Arisa’s lecture. “Humans grow quickly. I’ll catch up to you in no time!” she added to Mia.

“Mm, good luck.” Mia didn’t look particularly threatened.

“Now that’s the spirit of the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves, Athena.”

This compliment came from none other than Princess Sistina, who had her ladies-in-waiting and the knight captain in tow.

“I believe I heard you say that the magic Lady Misanaria used earlier was created by a human?” she inquired of Arisa.

“Yes, I did indeed,” Arisa answered politely.

“Do you happen to know the creator’s name?”

“Well, erm...”

As Arisa hesitated, I used my “Fabrication” skill to come up with a suitable excuse.

“Please, I must ask that you not inquire any further. We received the spell on the condition that we promise not to reveal the name of its maker.”

“Even for a personal request from yours truly?”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

I bowed my head in apology, sensing death glares from her entourage.

They must have thought I wasn’t being sufficiently respectful to royalty.

“I would thank you generously, of course. How does a collection of advanced Water Magic spellbooks and dictionaries sound?”

That was certainly a tempting offer, but I simply kept my head bowed and apologized again, politely but firmly rejecting her request.

“Very well, then... Ah, it appears the guards have arrived.”

The princess sighed and walked away from me.

“Squishyyy...?”

“And squashy, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were poking at the dead monsters.

“Looks like the extremities are starting to rot.”

Noticing the princess’s approach, Liza picked up the pair and carried them away. Tama and Pochi hadn’t broken out their dead body impressions in a while, and this time they put extra effort into it. Sticking out their tongues was

one thing, but rolling back their eyes was a creepy touch I could've done without.

"Athena, do you think these monsters might be the reason the Holy Sakura Tree hasn't bloomed?" the princess asked.

Athena thought in silence for a moment.

They must have been investigating the issues with the Royal Sakura.

"...It is possible. I've never seen the likes of those magic barriers before..."

...Wait a minute.

Athena's words reminded me of something.

Those magic circles looked just like the ones on the plunderers we defeated in the labyrinth who were overdosed with demonic potion.

"You there! If you know something, go on and spit it out."

The realization must have shown on my face. Since it was a princess's order, I explained that it looked identical to the defense barrier I had seen on demonic potion users.

As I did so, I searched the map for demonic potions, but they didn't appear to be in circulation here aside from a few individuals with very small amounts. However, the map search didn't account for anything inside an Item Box, so it was theoretically possible that they were being hidden that way.

"Demonic potion... That may be worth looking into. Thank you, erm... What was your name again?"

"My apologies, I don't believe I had introduced myself yet. I am Honorary Knight Satou Pendragon, vassal of Baron Muno."

"I'll be sure to remember that. Athena, can you remind me where we were heading next?"

Athena responded with the name of a botanist the Echigoya Company was funding.

"I've never heard the name. I do hope we may be able to find some sort of lead..."

“Don’t worry, Your Highness! I swear on the title of Sakura Protector that I will make sure the Royal Sakura Tree blooms again this year!”

“Of course. After all, the cherry blossoms simply must bloom in order to keep our promise with the great ancestral king.”

Princess Sistina and Ms. Athena nodded at each other in determination.

As I looked on with a smile, the princess’s eyes met mine.

“I’m sure they will bloom.”

The sakura dryad told me as much.

“I don’t require any baseless promises, thank you.”

The princess turned up her nose.

I meant those words sincerely, but I guess I didn’t get through to her.

“Ah yes...”

Looking past me, the princess spotted Tama and Pochi, who had gotten bored with playing dead and were making hand signals at each other, and appeared to remember something.

“Let me show you something worth seeing.”

She produced a scroll from her bosom, unfurled it, and used it.

“Fireworrrks...?”

“Master’s fireworks, sir!”

Pochi was right: It was the Light Magic spell Fireworks Illusion that I had created and mass-produced through Viscount Siemmen’s scroll workshop.

“This ‘master’—that is, Sir Pendragon—are his fireworks even more lovely?”

“Yes, sir! Master’s fireworks are the best—”

Liza covered Pochi’s mouth, but it was too late, presumably because her other hand was still carrying Tama.

“You created that Water Magic, too, then, hmm?”

“Yes, it is just as you’ve deduced.” I nodded meekly.

There was no point trying to hide it now, when she could easily use the power of the royal family to pry it out of Viscount Siemmen.

“Hmm, so you admit it.” The princess looked at me appraisingly. “I’ve been wanting to ask you something if ever we were to meet. There is something rather redundant about the Fireworks and Fireworks Illusion spells. Why might that be?”

If she could ask a question like that, that likely meant she had sent for the original scroll and read the contents closely.

“I wanted to emphasize readability and reusability over efficient execution time.”

“Readability? Whatever for? The only people who will try to read your spells and understand the inner workings are enemies or spell researchers, you know.”

Enemies... I guess it would make more sense to lower readability as a defense if it was a military spell.

“Improving readability makes it easier to correct any malfunctions that might arise. With traditional spells, it can be very difficult to investigate which portion is causing difficulties.”

“Mm-hmm... What do you mean by reusability, then? Do you think that the chants of spells are so simple that you can simply cut out bits and pieces and paste them wherever you’d like?”

The princess’s glasses glittered.

She didn’t seem too impressed with my rationale for readability, but she shifted the subject to the matter of reusability anyway.

“No, certainly not. But I feel that traditional spells are too focused on efficiency and execution time and have degenerated to the point where it’s impossible to dismantle them from one large passage.”

“‘Degenerated,’ you say? Now, that is a comment I simply cannot overlook. Even compared to the magic of the great ancestral king’s era, modern magic has improved in both invocation speed and power. Has it not?”

“It has, but at the cost of readability and reusability. While magic has advanced in terms of the optimization of a single spell, the difficulty of creating derivative spells has immensely increased. Developing spells now takes a colossal amount of time and manpower, wouldn’t you agree?”

“...Yes, that’s true.”

The princess nodded slowly.

I couldn’t see her eyes behind the shimmering surface of her glasses, but the edges of her lips quivered ever so slightly.

Did I put her in a bad mood?

I was enjoying the explanation of spell improvement so much that I forgot to check on the princess’s state of affairs.

“Well then, might I ask your opinion on one more topic?”

The princess’s eyes blazed challengingly.

“Of course, if I have any knowledge about it,” I responded humbly.

“Are you by chance familiar with Ruta-Style Fire Ball, the spell Ruta Raffol developed based on Fire Ball during the reign of King Gartapht?”

...I was not.

I did a quick search of the spellbooks I had on hand and found that it was a variation on Fire Ball that increased its power.

According to one book, it was made for military use, and to this day the main Fire Ball spells used by armies were Ruta-Style Fire Ball and its offshoot Rutario-Style Fire Ball.

Both variants had 30 percent higher firepower than the original spell while still costing the same amount of MP.

“It’s a military-use Fire Ball spell,” I stated, despite the fact that I had only just learned this.

“Then you’re familiar with its primary flaw as well?”

I shook my head, somehow feeling like I was interviewing for a job.

The flaw she explained was written in the spellbook as well. The problem with Ruta-Style and Rutario-Style Fire Ball was an extremely rare malfunction that caused it to explode someplace its user did not intend.

And that was the main reason that the original Fire Ball was still the one recorded in most spellbooks.

“And do you know why that problem occurs, I wonder?”

“The source of the problem, hmm...?”

I skimmed over the spell as I parroted her question.

It was a somewhat familiar-looking form of “spaghetti code”—coding that was tangled up and difficult to read. I had never seen this specific spell before, but it had similar idiosyncrasies to the spell code I used as reference when I made a Fire Magic spell for Arisa before.

I distinctly remembered struggling to transplant portions of the code because it had a nasty habit of reusing the important variables that designated the area of effect in several other parts of the code as free variables.

“You can’t tell?”

The princess sounded like an examiner.

“No, just a moment...”

As I responded, I went through the flow of the spell in my mind.

...Found it. This spell had the same mistake as the other one.

“Look at these two places.” I produced a spellbook from my Garage Bag and pointed out the problematic areas. “Some of the variables used for the explosion conditions here are also used here to calculate trajectory correction. These conditions are only used in incredibly limited contexts, which is probably why the error happens so rarely.”

There might have been a deeper cause than that, but I doubted she was expecting a completely flawless answer anyway.

“...Brilliant!” After reading the spell under her breath for a moment, the princess raised her head. “Aah! What a wonderful day today has become!”

Clasping my hand in both of hers, the princess gazed at me with the sparkling eyes of a dreamy maiden. It was a complete one-eighty from the examiner-like attitude she had just moments before.

“You really are the creator of the Fireworks spell!”

Ah, so she was testing whether I was really the creator or not.

I was having so much fun solving the problem that I instinctively gave the correct answer, but maybe saying “I don’t know” would have been enough to keep my secret intact.

“Is it just me, or is this taking a dangerous turn?”

“Mm, bad.”

The iron-wall pair of Arisa and Mia began urgently whispering among themselves.

“I’ve been captivated by you from the moment I first saw the beautiful composition of the Fireworks spell, you see.”

You mean captivated by my spell-making ability.

I wished she would make her statement a bit clearer, since the crowd around us was starting to get noisy about it. Also, her face was way too close.

“Oh, how I wish I could speak with you all the night long.”

The princess stretched one hand up toward the heavens and threw her head back to the sky like a lead actress in a play.

I was glad there was some distance between us now, but her other hand was still firmly grasping my own.

“If only you would explain every last detail of the artistry of that chant, I should even be willing to marry into your family, Sir Pendragon.”

Just as I was starting to suspect, the princess was apparently a serious spell maniac.

“Your Highness! Return to the carriage at once.”

“Y-yes, please do! We must resume our investigation so that the Royal Sakura Tree will bloom!”

“Ah, aaah, Lord Satooou...”

The princess, who was by now behaving like a different person entirely, was reluctantly dragged back to the carriage by her ladies-in-waiting and Ms. Athena.

“No cheating.”

“Master, do you have some kind of special pheromones that attract lovers or something?”

Mia and Arisa closed in on me.

I pushed Arisa’s face away as she tried to sniff me and made my way over to Pochi, who was being scolded by Liza about the Fireworks incident.

“Master, I’m very sorry, sir. Pochi was very, very bad, sir.”

“I’m terribly sorry, master. I neglected to supervise her properly.”

Liza bowed her head along with Pochi.

“It’s all right, you two. I forgot to tell you not to say anything about the Fireworks spell anyway. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“You won’t abandon Pochi, sir?”

“Of course not.”

I patted the teary-eyed Pochi’s head in reassurance.

“Master, you’re much too soft on Pochi, you know,” Arisa grumbled.

“No meat?”

At Mia’s suggestion, Pochi turned pale, as did the other two beastfolk girls.

Is it really that serious of a punishment?

“N-no meat... Master, no meat for Pochi, sir?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t punish you like that. In fact, we’ll have hamburg steak for dinner tonight.”

“Amazingly amazing, sir! Pochi can eat infinity hamburg steaks, sir!”

“Tama tooo...”

Pochi and Tama did a little dance of joy.

I had been planning on fried sakura salmon as the main dish, but I guess changing plans as a matter of course was a good choice.

After we cooperated with the soldiers' investigation, we left them in charge of the aftermath and returned to our sightseeing tour of the royal capital.

Forbidden Library

Satou here. The words forbidden library make me picture a fantasy-esque image of shelves upon shelves of forbidden, secret spellbooks. The collection would seem even more valuable if it were guarded by a large beast like a dragon or a cerberus.

“Good evening, Your Majesty.”

After the sun set, I came to the office of the king to report the strange monsters with the red-rope pattern that we’d run into that afternoon.

I don’t like to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, but we wouldn’t be able to enjoy our royal capital sightseeing in peace if it turned into a huge incident, which was why I thought it might be best to help them solve the case.

I was only helping, though; hopefully the king and the rest of the Shiga Kingdom law enforcement would take care of the heavy lifting.

“Why, if it isn’t the great ancest...that is, Lord Nanashi!”

“What an honor to have you visit us, King...I mean, Lord Nanashi.”

“I’m not the ancestral king,” I reminded them, since they were clearly confusing me with the ancestral king Yamato as usual. Sir Juleburg, the leader of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, wasn’t guarding the king today—there were only two imperial knights at the door.

The red-rope monsters were going to take a while to explain, so I started with some simpler business first.

“I hate to mix business and private affairs, but there are two girls working at the Echigoya Company who became criminal slaves under false charges. Is there any chance you could issue a pardon?”

While it technically wasn’t a false charge, I decided that would be the easiest way to explain it since it was essentially just an excuse to punish them.

“Might I inquire as to the nature of the charge?”

“Disrespecting a ruler, I suppose?”

I gave a simple summary of the story, leaving out any names.

“I see. If that is the extent of their crimes, then I see no issue. I shall give them a pardon at once.”

The king agreed with me immediately and prepared letters of pardon on the spot. He offered to issue an official notice of exoneration as well, but I advised against it lest he worsen the royal family’s relationship with Lessau County.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

After I thanked him, I also told him about Cardinal Hozzunās’s recognition-inhibiting item and his real level and skills.

“To think he was hiding such a treasure...”

“Lord Nanashi, thank you for that valuable information.”

The cardinal had visited the Shiga Kingdom many times. Evidently, he had never done anything suspicious, but they said they would assign a few capable spies to keep an eye on him, just in case.

“Also, the underground vein in the royal capital was in a weird state, so I fixed it.”

I didn’t mention that the sakura dryad had asked me to do so, just in case it revealed my true identity.

“Your Majesty! Could it be that a disturbance in the earthen vein was the cause of the monsters appearing in the royal capital?!”

Oh hey, that’s a good segue. I jumped on the topic as well.

“Monsters appeared in the royal capital? Not just lesser undead or tamed monsters?”

I phrased it that way because of the skeletons and rock-bomb-throwing insect monsters that were involved in the attack on Vistall Duchy not long ago.

“Yes, from last night to this evening, insect, rat, and bat-like monsters appeared in five different locations in the royal capital. They injured people

nearby, destroyed the surrounding buildings, then disappeared back underground.”

The prime minister described all the locations and the number of monsters at each.

We were at the fourth site, while the fifth was during the time we were having dinner.

“The only two locations where they were able to destroy all the monsters were the third, where Ryuona of the Shiga Eight made it in time, and the fourth, where the mithril explorer Sir Pendragon happened to be present.”

“The rest all got away?”

“Indeed.” The prime minister nodded.

It was possible that the monsters that escaped were the same ones that appeared near the fountain where we saw them, but none of them had appeared injured from prior battles as far as I could tell.

Besides, at that time, I’d destroyed all the monsters underground with Remote Arrow. The monsters at the fifth location must have snuck in after that or been brought in by someone.

When I searched the map, I didn’t see any monsters here. There were several monster corpses, presumably the ones that had escaped from the fifth site.

When I told the prime minister where I saw the monster corpses, he seemed thrilled.

“...So do you know how the monsters got in exactly?”

“No, not as of yet. Please forgive our incompetence.”

However, some guards investigating in the tunnels had found evidence of suspicious rituals.

“Suspicious rituals?”

“Indeed, they discovered traces of curse-related magic circles.”

They showed me a reproduction made by a royal researcher, but it was no magic circle I had ever seen. It didn’t appear to resemble the kinds I saw in the

ruins of the labyrinth under the old capital or the plunderers' torture chambers, either.

According to the attached report, the magic circles were drawn in charcoal, and dead insects and small animals were scattered nearby, along with what appeared to be curse stones. There was even one instance of the melted remains of a magic tool being found near a magic circle.

Curse stones... Come to think of it, I did see those at the Sahbe Company. He said a man from the Wind of Freedom occult club often bought them. It might be a bit too hasty to suspect them because of that, but I decided to file it away in the back of my mind.

Just in case, I wrote the locations from the report down in the memo tab of my menu.

"Did you investigate this magic tool?"

"Yes, we have documents on it from the royal research lab."

The tool was completely melted down and broken. All they were able to see was the item description NE 3 4 CHI MAGIC TOOL and the name of its creator.

The creator in question was a ratfolk second-class magic tool craftsman; he had been fired from the royal capital magic tool workshop a few years ago and spent his time these days scraping by in the lower city, making and selling illicit magical tools.

According to the prime minister, they had already sent out an investigator to keep an eye on the craftsman, waiting for the person who requested the magic tool to make contact.

That was pretty impressive, considering it had only been about a day since the first incident.

Here I thought I would assist the investigation using my map search, but I guess they didn't need my help after all.

"Do monsters appear in the royal capital often?"

"Certainly not. A monster of unknown origin showing up in the capital is a rare event that likely only happens once every few decades," the prime minister

responded. “Your Majesty, perhaps this is the ‘unprecedented danger’ the priestesses of the seven temples spoke of.”

“Perhaps we were too hasty to assume they were only attempting to garner more donations as usual.”

The king grimaced.

“I am glad we placed the Shiga Eight and the knights on patrol just to be safe.”

“Indeed. Even if nothing went wrong, it would still be good for public safety.”

I see, so they did take precautions based on the oracle, unlike those lesser nobles.

I showed the report to the pair and asked about the most important point.

“This report says that in battle, the monsters’ bodies were covered in red-rope-like magic circles. Is that different from the pattern that appears on people who have used too much demonic potion?”

“According to a knight who actually fought them, Sir Pendragon said something similar on the scene. Shall I invite him to the royal castle?”

Uh-oh, that’s the last thing I need.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go ask him myself. More importantly, Your Majesty, don’t you have any detailed documents about demonic potion?”

“Those would be stored in the forbidden library below the castle.”

I guess they treated this subject pretty seriously.

“I’d like to have a look. Could you give me permission to enter that forbidden library?”

“Goodness, why so formal? Our castle is your castle, King—that is, Lord Nanashi. You may come and go wherever and whenever you please.”

Okay, that seems way too lenient for a royal castle.

The king guided me to an elevator nestled within the royal family’s private area of the castle, leading me to the forbidden library deep underground.

It was adjacent to the treasure room, and the passage that led to both

entrances was guarded by a heavy-looking magically enhanced gate.

There were several guards with levels in the mid to high 30s stationed outside the gate.

“Only those who have been granted permission can proceed past this—”

As I listened to the king, I moved closer to take a look at the magic circuits engraved into the gate.

As I did so, I felt myself passing through some kind of barrier.

“...Incredible, Lord Nanashi. No, I suppose it is only natural that you would already have permission.”

“Your Majesty, a word?”

The guards seemed alarmed to hear the king refer to me as “Lord,” so I quietly warned him to be careful about his tone with me in front of others.

According to the king, I had just passed through a powerful anti-intruder barrier that normally kept out anyone who didn’t have permission to enter. If someone tried to force their way through, an alarm would ring throughout the royal castle, and the guards would come running.

“This area is off-limits. If you wish to pass, you must state your business.”

The knight on duty was stoicism made flesh. He was so by-the-book that he even made the king state his business to enter.

“I am King Seterarik of Shiga. My companion here is Sir Nanashi the Hero. We are here to peruse some files in the forbidden library.”

The king gave a dignified response, unbothered by the knight’s by-the-book treatment.

I had a feeling these particular guidelines must have been written by the ancestral king.

“Sir Hero, please remove your mask so that I can verify your face, as stated in the rules.”

The king looked at me nervously, but I waved him off and said, “It’s fine,” removing the mask to show my face—at least, the face I was wearing with my

magical Disguise mask—and get permission to enter.

“I, Imperial Knight Zan Kelten, grant thee permission to enter. ...■ <**Open Gate!>**”

The knight held aloft an amulet that appeared to be a City Core device and recited a chant and a keyword, and the heavy gate swung open without anyone laying a finger on it.

“Please enter.”

“Indeed.”

The king nodded gravely and walked through, with me following close behind. The door swung shut behind us.

We continued down a corridor lit by magic lights. Before long, the path branched between the route to the forbidden library and the treasure room, and we proceeded toward the former.

It was a considerable distance, but the king didn’t seem the least bit tired. I mentioned this as we chatted, and he explained that he’d trained hard when he was young in hopes of becoming a Holy Knight.

We passed through seven more gates before we reached the forbidden library, though only the first and second had human gatekeepers; the rest were guarded by constructs like golems and living armor. The corridors also had carved statues at regular intervals, which spoke to the importance of the room we were approaching.

“This is the forbidden library.”

The king waved his scepter, and a bulkhead-like pair of double doors swung open.

As we entered the forbidden library, the scent of old paper tickled my nose. It was dimly lit, with the temperature and humidity levels optimized for book preservation.

The king raised his scepter again, and this time the room filled with light. The indirect lighting was probably to avoid damaging the books with strong direct light.

Past the entrance hall, there were rows of bookshelves that reached the ceiling.

Checking my map, I realized that we were now in a different area than the rest of the royal castle, so I used my “Search Entire Map” skill. There was only one person browsing the books, with no librarian in sight, and the only guards were twenty or so small golems and living dolls.

“Your Majesty! I was wondering who it might be at this hour.”

Along with the over-serious voice came a pair of trademark glasses: Princess Sistina.

“Indeed. How are you? I see you continue to be a bookworm instead of attending the evening parties.”

I was a little taken aback by the king’s words.

I did see her at the evening’s medal celebration party. Maybe she was just there looking for someone, not actually attending herself?

“Oh yes. Fortunately, my marriage to the next Count Lessau is no longer on the table, which means I can continue to read in the forbidden library as much as I like. If possible, I should like nothing more than to spend the rest of my life surrounded by books and never get married.”

As she chatted comfortably with the king, the princess noticed me hiding in his shadow.

Her steely blue eyes glared at me from behind her gold-rimmed glasses.

“And who is this suspicious-looking individual? A new guard?”

“Watch your tone. This is the great Sir Nanashi the Hero.”

“Nice to meetcha, Your Highness.”

Evidently, the misunderstanding that I was the ancestral king was a secret between the king and the prime minister. The princess gave me a somewhat annoyed look when I greeted her much too casually.

“A hero? He doesn’t even begin to compare to *him*...”

The princess muttered something so quietly that even my “Keen Hearing” skill

barely picked it up, then turned her gaze back to the king.

“I am busy researching the Holy Sakura Tree, so if you’ll excuse me...”

With a curtsy to the king, the princess retreated to her research room within the forbidden library.

Come to think of it, she had been talking about the “Holy Sakura Tree not blooming” when I saw her this afternoon, too.

“Lord Nanashi, please pardon my daughter’s rudeness.”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

I wasn’t really bothered by her cold attitude, possibly because I’d seen her gushing like a fool earlier that day.

“Let’s just find those documents.”

“Very well. Let us go to the Librarian.”

The king led the way to an eight-armed golem stationed deeper in the library.

“Lord Nanashi, this is the Librarian of the forbidden library.”

“YOUR MAJESTY—WHAT CAN—I DO FOR YOU—TODAY?”

The golem spoke in stilted artificial speech.

It had a stern appearance, but for some reason its synthesized voice was so cutesy it would have sounded right at home in a moe anime.

“Librarian, by the power of the monarch of the Shiga Kingdom, I grant Lord Nanashi here access to any forbidden books up to the third floor.”

“YES—PROCESSING—NOW.”

There were four floors in the forbidden library.

So the bottom floor was still off-limits... Well, I could still find out the book titles from my map’s item search. If there was anything I really wanted to read, I could just use Magic Hand to read it through my Storage.

“Lord Nanashi, you may already be aware, but only the current king is permitted to enter the bottom floor of the forbidden library. The Librarian has a catalogue of its contents, so if there are any books you require, I can go and get

them for you. My apologies.”

No, I don't think I can use the king as a gofer... But since I couldn't exactly say “It's fine, I can read them anyway,” I just said, “Sure, thanks.”

Evidently, the king still had duties to attend to. I thanked him for guiding me and bade him farewell, then used the help of the Librarian and the living dolls to dig into my investigation of demonic potions.

I found several books containing information on demonic potion, including a general history and even the recipe.

I took care to avoid reading the recipe as I investigated. Unfortunately, there were no clear answers about the inherent skill “Monster Rope Wrap” that appeared in the recent monster incidents.

There were records of experiments in giving demonic potion to animals and monsters during the demi-human war about four hundred years ago; however, the phrase *Monster Rope Wrap* was nowhere to be found.

I even tried asking the Librarian directly, “Are there any materials pertaining to ‘Monster Rope Wrap’?” but was met with a flat-out “NO.”

“Anything else that might be relevant?”

“THESE ARE—ALL THE BOOKS—RELATED TO—DEMONIC POTION.” The Librarian's eyes flashed alternately for a moment. “LOCATED—NEW ARRIVAL—RECORDS OF—ILLICIT MANUFACTURING —DEMONIC POTIONS—IN DATABASE.”

I had the golem send away for the materials, which turned out to be a record of the recent incident with Sokell producing demonic potion in Labyrinth City. There wasn't really any new information there.

It appeared that they still hadn't figured out where the demonic potion that was smuggled out from Tartumina had ended up. The operative in charge of the investigation suspected the smaller nations to the west of the continent, where demand was high.

The large amount of demonic potion that was discovered in one of Marquis Kelten's army's storehouses had apparently been secretly disposed of in the

royal research lab.

I tried investigating curses and such as well, but I couldn't find any with that same magic circle. The only similar-looking patterns were all silly-sounding ones like "stub-your-toe-on-a-bureau curse," "itchy-back curse," and "bed-wetting curse."

They all seemed like curses that the casual occultism fan club Wind of Freedom would be thrilled about.

It might even be possible that the traces of the rituals were unrelated to the appearance of the monsters.

At any rate, it seemed highly unlikely that it was a dangerous magic circle; I could probably put that investigation on hold until the royal research lab gave its final verdict.

I researched a few other details more closely, pausing along the way to skim some spellbooks I found on the shelves.

True to its name, the forbidden library contained many advanced spells and taboo curses that I had never seen before. From Wind Magic that could asphyxiate living beings, to Space Magic with a nuclear explosion-like effect, and even Ghost Magic for reviving a dragon corpse as an undead dragon and enslaving it, there were all kinds of crazy, dangerous-sounding spells. There didn't appear to be any anti-god magic, however.

The nuclear explosion spell was the only one that had important pieces of code deliberately removed so that it couldn't be used.

I could probably complete it if I really tried, but I had no desire to turn it into a workable spell. The idea of unleashing radiation in this world was too terrifying, and from what I could make of the code, it sounded like a self-destructive spell that would be incredibly difficult to control. It would be too risky to even try it out.

However, I did pick up a few forbidden curses like White Inferno, Leviathan Breath, and Dimension Eater that seemed like they would be good for Arisa or Mia.

There were some spells that seemed like they should be forbidden, except

they lacked the firepower or chant code complexity to match up to advanced magic, so were instead categorized as quasi-forbidden.

Later on, I had Arisa test them out and discovered that forbidden curses couldn't be invoked without a chant, even if they were successful with one. This was spoken of in the legends of ancestral king Yamato, too, as it turned out.

That was a bit of a digression, but I still managed to loosely investigate what I needed to know for now. After placing a seal slate in a discreet place outside the forbidden library so I could return at any time, I decided to take my leave.



“...And that’s all we know. I’d appreciate it if you could gather more information.”

After I left the forbidden library, I transformed into my disguise as Kuro and paid a visit to the Echigoya Company, where I requested that the manager seek out eyewitness reports about the red-rope monsters.

“Understood. Tifaleeza, please begin the preparations at once.”

“Shall I mobilize the beggars’ guild as well?”

“Yes, please.”

Tifaleeza and the manager leaped into action in perfect harmony. I stopped Tifaleeza before she left the room to give an additional request.

“Any information about those bodies that were attacked by monsters would be good, too. Only within the realm of possibility, of course.”

“Very well.”

“Monsters with a red-rope magic circle... That sounds similar to the abilities of the top plunderers.”

Once Tifaleeza left the room, Manager Eluterina—who had once been a captive of the plunderers—made this remark.

“Yes, that’s what the Pendragon boy said after he ran into them. The red-rope monsters’ skill was called ‘Monster Rope Wrap,’ while the plunderers’ was called ‘Demonic Body,’ but he said their abilities were similar.”

It seemed best to relay this much information, and since the king had mentioned Satou's name in front of Nanashi, it wouldn't be that strange for Kuro to know about it.

With the red-rope monster discussion taken care of, the next step was...

"Releasin' us from slavery?"

"But, Lord Kuro, we are criminal slaves. There is no way to release criminal slaves by any ordinary means."

When Tifaleeza finished her paperwork and came back, I called in Neru as well and told them that I was getting their slavery contracts dissolved.

"Not to worry. My employer got a letter of pardon from the king himself for you two."

As I explained, I handed the letters over to Neru and Tifaleeza.

"You givin' us the boot?!" Neru exclaimed, misunderstanding this as a release from her employment as well.

"Do you want to quit?"

"Course not, sir!" Neru responded at once.

"Then just keep working as you always have."

That put a smile back on Neru's face, but Tifaleeza's expression remained darkened from the moment I first brought up the topic.

"What's up, Tifa?"

Tifaleeza didn't look up at Neru's question.

"Did you not want to be released with a pardon?" I asked.

Maybe I should've let the king issue an official notice of exoneration like he'd offered?

"...contract... Lord Kuro...lose...connection..."

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on halting murmurs from Tifaleeza. She was so quiet that even then, I couldn't make out most of what she said.

"Tifaleeza...?"

When I said her name, Tifaleeza's head whipped up, and she suddenly made a desperate plea.

"Please! Let me continue being your slave, Lord Kuro!"

For whatever reason, she seemed to want to remain a slave.

I can never quite figure out what girls her age are thinking.

"Well, if you do want to be released, just say so anytime."

"...Thank you," Tifaleeza responded in a near-whisper.

I handed her letter of pardon off to the manager. It wouldn't do to give it to Tifaleeza herself only to have her rip it up or burn it on a sudden impulse.

With my other business concluded, I headed to the Ivy Manor in Labyrinth City.

I wanted to try making a magic communication device using the research equipment there. When we needed to communicate, Arisa's Tactical Talk or my Telephone were more convenient, but those spells had the disadvantage of needing to come from one of us two.

Ever since Mukuro (a reincarnation who lived deep in the labyrinth) told me about how he'd incurred the gods' wrath by trying to create radio towers and railroad networks, I'd hesitated to move forward with my plan.

But there were spells that had the same functions, not to mention communication between City Cores or the communication crystals made in the labyrinth. I decided that I could avoid making it taboo by limiting the functions and users of my invention.

"Now, what kind of circuits should I use...?"

My main goal for now was to ensure that I could alert my companions, the Echigoya Company staff, and so on in the event of an emergency like another red-rope monster attack.

The best kinds of magic for a communication device would be Practical Magic, Wind Magic, and Space Magic.

Ghost Magic and Summoning Magic weren't very common, and Light Magic

could only go directly from one connected point to another, making them ill-suited to individual communication. Water Magic, Earth Magic, Lightning Magic, and so on could communicate in theory, but they had almost as many restrictions as Light Magic, which was why I excluded them for now.

Weather could influence the effects of Wind Magic, so for the time being, I decided to focus on Practical Magic, which had simple circuits, and Space Magic, which had complex but highly effective circuits.

“Maybe something like this...?”

Before long, I had simple Space Magic–style communication devices for my friends and the Echigoya staff.

To reduce the amount of magic power required, the devices sent 6-bit live data signals, then converted the received information into 32-bit and displayed it on a panel. The reason I used 32-bit instead of 65536 data was because the remaining variables were used to identify the sender and receiver. Error correction and transmission data identifiers were not included in the live data.

The signals were broadcast over a wide range, with a built-in ability to determine whether a message was intended for that specific device or not.

To avoid confusion, I set up the magic devices for my group and the Echigoya Company so that they couldn’t communicate with each other and made them visibly distinct as well.

“Maybe it was a bit silly to make these look like pagers.”

The devices for the Echigoya Company top brass were made to look like amulets.

Both required a fair amount of magic power but, in exchange, could send a signal anywhere within the royal capital.

“I guess I’ll wait for the right circumstances to distribute them...”

The Practical Magic–style tools worked similarly to the Signal spell: They were simple devices that could only send a special message that read EMERGENCY.

These were designed to automatically charge with the required amount of magic power from the owner when carried around.

“Whoops, it’s already dawn...”

When I left the Ivy Manor, the sun was already starting to rise.

“Arisa’s going to yell at me again.”

I stretched once to shake off the stiffness before using the Return spell to head back to the royal capital mansion.

Interlude

“Mito, the royal capital’s in sight.”

A pretty blonde-haired woman in a dress ill-suited to travel called out from atop a mountain ridge, where she was peering far into the distance.

“Whaaat? Wherrre...?”

The black-haired girl called Mito leaned forward on the runosaur she was riding and squinted into the wind.

“Straight ahead. Don’t you see it between those twin mountains?”

“No way. You’re the only one who can see that far with the naked eye, Sky.”

Mito then muttered, “Long Sight.”

“Okay, now I see it. That’s the royal capital, all right.”

It was much too far away for any ordinary person to see without the use of a longscope or something similar, but Mito managed it with the help of a chant-less Practical Magic spell.

“I kinda feel like it’s gotten bigger... Maybe it’s just been a long time since I’ve seen it, though.”

“No, it’s not your imagination. It’s several times larger than the last time I saw it.”

“I knew it! Even the farmland without barrier posts has spread so far it’d take several days to walk the whole distance. I guess the last few kings have been sticking to the farm expansion plan we made with Sharorik and the others.”

After rambling in excitement, Mito quieted as she scanned the fields.

The blonde beauty gently wiped away the tears that formed in Mito’s eyes with a pale, translucent finger.

“That’s great, Mito.”

“Yeah.”

Shaking off her sentimental moment, Mito urged the runosaur onward.

“Mito, monsters.”

“Is it demi-goblins? We should do some pest control if they’re this close to settled land.”

Mito raised her arm, and fifteen transparent arrows appeared around her. When she brought her arm down, the arrows flew in all directions, hunting down the monsters that lurked in the brush.

If someone familiar with Practical Magic had been present, they would recognize it as the lesser magic spell Magic Arrow, but they would likely be shocked to see it send out three times the number of arrows that even the most experienced mage could produce.

Although perhaps that was still relatively unimpressive compared to the hundred and twenty Magic Arrows used by the masked hero Nanashi...

“Monsters within the walls... Maybe it really is impossible to make a perfect safe zone.”

“Of course it is. Wherever people gather, miasma will form. And when the miasma grows thick, monsters will always appear. That’s just how this world works.”

“Right. I know that, Sky.”

Mito looked a little sad.

“You’ve noticed, too, Mito?”

The blonde woman gazed past the mountains in the direction of the royal capital.

“Yeah, the miasma’s really thick.”

Mito peered through the silver lens hanging around her neck, looking in the same direction as the other woman, and nodded.

The miasma there was several times thicker than normal, though still much thinner than that found in a labyrinth or battlefield.

Those demi-goblins were most likely created when some of that thick miasma stagnated.

“I think it’s almost the new year, though. It’ll clear up when they do the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony.”

Mito had learned that the ceremony still continued to this day from a traveling merchant she’d met while working to raise money in Zetts County.

“Don’t worry, Mito. If the miasma attracts too many monsters or demons, I’ll assume my true form and burn them all to ash.”

“Ah-ha-ha, don’t do that.”

“Why not?!”

The blonde-haired woman stared wide-eyed at her friend who had just shut her down.

“If you let loose, monsters and demons won’t be the only ones destroyed.”

“That’s not—”

“—true? Can you be absolutely sure of that?”

The blonde fell into silence at Mito’s question, then grumpily turned away.

It looked like the royal capital would last another year without being burned to the ground.

Plenty of Pastimes

Satou here. One of my friends once said, 'I want to live in a woodsy retreat and be one with nature.' This was sometime after they had grown obsessed with LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability), and so they bought a vacation home in the mountains. That friend got bored really quickly, however, and returned to civilization in no time at all.

"...Huh?"

When I used Return to arrive back in my study in the royal capital mansion, I spotted Pochi falling outside the window.

Immediately, I used my always-activated Magic Hand to try to catch her.

"Ouchie."

Pochi was somersaulting through the air in a defensive curl, but she let out a childish yelp when the Magic Hand unexpectedly caught her by the stomach.

"Sorry, sorry. Are you okay?"

"Thank you, sir. Pochi is just fine, sir!"

I lowered Pochi to the ground and jumped out the window after her, landing in the backyard.

"Welcoome...?"

Looking back up, I saw Tama hanging off the wall and waving.

Pochi must have been doing ninja training with Tama and lost her footing.

"I forgot, sir. Welcome home, sir!"

"Thanks. Morning training?"

"Aye-aye..."

"We finished our daily run around the perimeter of the city, so me and Tama

were doing ninja jumps from roof to roof on our way back, sir.”

“Training is great and all, but don’t do anything too dangerous.”

“Yes, sir. Pochi might make a better Mr. Samurai than a ninja after all, sir.”

As we chatted and walked toward the central courtyard, I saw Liza and Nana stretching after their morning run.

I decided to join in, since I was feeling stiff myself.

“Pochi will train in sword drawing and ‘One-Stroke Kill’ and become a samurai, sir!”

Pochi picked up a stick and mimed drawing a sword, cutting down an imaginary opponent, and sheathing it dramatically.

If I remembered right, the Samurai of the Saga Empire Mr. Kajiro had taught her the technique in Labyrinth City.

“Ooh, very nice!”

“Mm. Sword drawing.”

I turned around and found Arisa and Mia approaching in their pajamas.

Lulu was following behind them, carrying a tray with glasses of vegetable juice for everyone.

“Master, you should show Pochi a real *iai*—a ‘One-Hit Kill.’”

Arisa looked at me with eager “*Go on, then!*” eyes.

As if on cue, the rest of the group turned to me with similar excitement.

They were all so excited that I couldn’t bring myself to admit I had never done it.

“Use Pochi’s samurai blade, please, sir.”

I accepted the Japanese-style katana, which we’d found in a labyrinth treasure chest.

Then I told them I had to warm up first and did a practice imitation of the sword-drawing and -sheathing art.

> Skill Acquired: “One-Hit Kill”

Sure enough, I got the skill I needed, and I promptly put in skill points and activated it.

This time, when I put my hand on the sheathed katana, I could somehow sense the right speed and angle.

“Here goes.”

With that, I performed a proper *iai*.

“Amaziiiing...?”

“The ultimate ‘One-Hit Kill’ quick draw, sir!”

“What remarkable swordsmanship.”

The beastfolk girls, who had excellent kinetic vision, all exclaimed in admiration.

“No way—it was so fast, I didn’t see a thing!”

“To me, it only looked like your hand blurred for a second.”

“Wow.”

Apparently, it was so fast that the rear guard couldn’t even follow it.

“It really is the speediest sword technique ever!”

Arisa looked thrilled nonetheless.

It would actually be faster to just bring the sword up and swing it down normally, but since my ‘One-Hit Kill’ technique immediately returned the blade to the sheath, it must have given a stronger impression.

“I wouldn’t say it’s the speediest.”

I showed them how the technique would look if I stopped before sheathing the blade, then demonstrated a regular overhead downward swing, clearing up the misconception. For the latter, I used the Zi-Gain style Mr. Kajiro had taught me.

“I—I see. So it’s just you who’s overpowered, not the technique.”

That comment was uncalled-for.

“Master, I wish to test whether I can block the ‘One-Hit Kill,’ I request.”

“Next time, okay?” I wanted to have a better mastery of the technique before we tried anything like that to ensure that I wouldn’t hurt her.

Instead, I assented to Arisa’s “Cut something for us!” request by making three straw dummies and cutting them down with a flashy combination of “Warp” and “One-Hit Kill”; it made for a satisfying show of sheathing the sword with a *clack* just as the dummies were sliced neatly in half.

“Very greeeat...?”

“Pochi wants to try, too, sir!”

I handed the katana back to Pochi, who was jumping up and down in excitement.

“Ka-shooooom!”

Pochi made her own sound effects as she tried a few “One-Hit Kills.”

The combination of her short arms and the long blade appeared to be making it difficult for her to draw the sword smoothly.

“Pochi, be serious.” Liza scolded her, mistakenly thinking she was joking around.

“Y-yes, sir!”

Pochi doubled her efforts.

Somehow, this resulted in Spellblade running through the katana’s blade.

I have a bad feeling about this.

“Hi-ya, sir!”

Pochi’s blade flashed red, sending out a crescent-shaped “Spellblade Shot” in a straight line.

Uh-oh.

Since I was already prepared for something to go wrong, I was able to produce “Magic Power Armor” on my hand as I used “Warp” to teleport in front of Pochi’s “Spellblade Shot,” catching it and canceling it out.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no, sir!”

Pochi's eyes spun in a panic at her own blunder, all the more so once Liza's fist dropped onto her head.

"I'm very sorry, sir."

"No, it's my fault for starting training like this in the courtyard," I reassured her, picking up the scabbard she'd tossed aside.

It'd be good to have a place nearby where we could train more freely.



"A secretary device, sir?"

"Ooh, so it's the magic item version of a personal security alarm."

After breakfast, I handed out the newly completed emergency alert items to my party and explained how to use them.

I had already stopped by the Echigoya Company to drop theirs off, leaving them along with a letter explaining how to use them on the manager's desk.

"Well, it seems like it's dangerous even in the royal capital lately. I made these so we can all stay in contact even if you're not with Arisa or me."

"You should've made a smartphone with the Telephone spell," Arisa grumbled.

"I'll improve on it eventually," I promised vaguely.

Just then, the bell announced that we had visitors: the people I'd hired by way of the Echigoya Company to work as maids and the private tutor for etiquette lessons.

Seeing that the plain-featured maids were all pallid and skinny, I asked Lulu to feed them all breakfast before they started working.

"Well then, good sir, may I begin straight away?"

While the private tutor seemed sweet, her voice had a serious edge that contrasted with her cozy appearance.

Before she got into the instruction for new nobles, she would be teaching Tama and Pochi alone for a while.

“Niiice...?”

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

“That’s all well and good in private spaces, but in public, be sure to say ‘nice to meet you’ loud and clear.”

I could hear the pair’s lessons beginning in the parlor.

“Aye...”

“Yes, sir.”

“Just a simple ‘yes’ will do.”

“Yep!”

“Yes...sir.”

It sounded like she had a long and difficult road ahead of her.

The lessons were scheduled for ninety minutes—one chime—after breakfast each day. Any longer than that, and I doubted Pochi and Tama would be able to stay focused.

Sure enough, less than two hours later...

“Boo-hoo...?”

“Pochi did her best, sir...*flop*.”

An exhausted-looking Tama and Pochi, and an even more exhausted-looking tutor, emerged from the parlor.

I served the staggering tutor some tea and snacks before asking how the lesson went.

“Y-yes, well, they’re very...enthusiastic...” The tutor chose her words carefully. “That is to say, they’re doing their best.”

From the sound of things, the pair were trying to obey the tutor’s instructions, but they both had such unique manners of speaking that they couldn’t quite get the hang of how to speak properly in a public setting.



“Maybe you could hold off on trying to correct their flaws for now, and just try to give them a vague overview of how socializing works?” Arisa, who’d been listening in, offered a suggestion. “Since the class time isn’t very long anyway.”

The private tutor had no objections, so I officially requested that she teach them in that direction going forward.

After the private tutor left, I healed the defeated-looking duo with some whale jerky, and we decided to go out on the town as planned.



“That was an amazing performance, to be sure.”

Arisa drifted along with dreamy steps.

Today, we had taken up the celebrated musician Sir Kestra on his offer to see a performance. I invited Lady Karina along, too, on the basis that she could study important culture.

“Such a passionate melody. It was really, really good. I’m satisfied, you know? Human music may be unrefined compared to elf music, but it’s still wonderful. It’s enjoyable in a different way, really. You know?”

Mia launched into one of her rare lengthy rants to describe her satisfaction with the show.

I had heard him perform before, but the performance in a concert hall designed for ideal acoustics was on a completely different level.

“Oui oooui...”

“Byooti-full, sir. Did you like it, Karina, sir?”

“O-oh yes, very much.”

Lady Karina was still staring at Mia; maybe she had never heard her speak that much before.

The rest of the girls all looked equally happy after the splendid performance.

As we passed through the atrium of the entrance hall, Nana suddenly stopped.

“Master, the passage is blocked, I report.”

Up ahead, a gaggle of dressed-up young ladies were all flocking around someone.

“Hey, isn’t that Lawrence?” Arisa said, peering through the crowd.

Indeed it was Cardinal Hozzunus of the Parion Province.

“Wow, he’s popular with everyone, from little girls to old ladies.”

“Yes, indeed.” Lady Karina sounded uninterested.

“You’re not into him, Lady Karina?”

“He is handsome, I suppose.”

Lady Karina shrugged. I guess she really wasn’t interested.

“Why, if it isn’t Satou.”

A voluptuous woman in the crowd—Rayuna Raffol, the viscount’s wife—trained a sultry gaze on me and beckoned me over.

“Wait, it’s a mature woman this time?”

“Mrr, adulterer.”

“I’ll explain later,” I told the misunderstanding pair, then walked over to Mrs. Raffol.

“Your Grace, let me introduce you to a friend of mine.”

At the sound of her voice, the cardinal looked at me.

“What a coincidence, Sir Pendragon,” he said with a smile.

“Oh? Do you two know each other?”

The cardinal explained the incident of the previous day to the confused-looking Mrs. Raffol.

“That’s my Satou for you,” Mrs. Raffol said proudly.

The cardinal smiled and added more lip service. “Yes, we would have been in grave danger were it not for their help.”

“Goodness, I can’t believe you fought monsters without me,” Lady Karina cut

in enviously.

Normally, this was where Pochi and Tama would chime in, but they said nothing.

“What’s the matter, you two?” Arisa asked.

“Mew...”

“Nothing, sir.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Tama’s ears flattened back and Pochi’s tail tucked between her legs. Both were hiding behind Liza.

Based on our respective positions, I guessed they were nervous around either Mrs. Raffol or Cardinal Hozzunus.

“Pardon me for interrupting your conversation. You are Sir Pendragon, correct? Sir Kestra personally requested that I bring you to see him.”

At the behest of someone who appeared to be the concert hall manager, I excused myself from Mrs. Raffol and the cardinal, and we followed the man to Sir Kestra’s dressing room.

“Welcome, little musician.”

Sir Kestra greeted us, or more specifically, Mia.

“What did you think of our performance?”

“Mm, great.” Mia nodded.

Looking satisfied with Mia’s answer, Sir Kestra finally turned to me and the others.

“Sir Pendragon, young ladies, did the rest of you enjoy it as well?”

“Yes, it was a wonderful performance. Thank you so much for inviting us today.”

After we chatted for a while, he asked if Mia might like to try performing on the stage.

“Yes.”

Mia was raring to go, so we went into the audience seats while he and Mia

moved to the stage.

Right away, Mia tuned her lute with a few strums, then began playing the same song Sir Kestra and company had just performed.

Man, she's good.

In her hands, it was a delicate yet powerful melody. It spoke to the heart so strongly that you might never guess it was being played by such a small performer with such little fingers. When I closed my eyes, the music brought spectacular sights to mind.

The song ended while I was still entranced.

"Please forgive my intrusion, Sir Kestra..."

As the pair were discussing what to play next, the sound engineer of the concert hall interrupted.

"What can I do for you?"

"I wish to thank you for letting us hear such a magnificent song, but also..."

Looking deeply apologetic, the sound engineer explained that the engineers and workers had gotten so absorbed in the music that they stopped working and politely requested that the jam session wait until after their work was done.

"Of course. Sorry about that."

"Sir Kestra! It's time for your meeting regarding the next program."

Immediately after Sir Kestra apologized to the sound engineer, another manager appeared from the wings to summon him away.

"Ah, nothing ever goes as planned... I suppose the next song will have to wait, then. Will you play with me again sometime?"

"Mm. Excited."

Mia nodded at Sir Kestra.

Maybe someday Mia would perform on the stage of the royal capital concert hall, just like Cyriltoa the Songstress in the old capital.



“Lots of sheet music.”

“Wow, the paper is much thicker than I expected!”

After we left the concert hall, we did some shopping on a nearby street lined with stores selling instruments, sheet music, and so on.

I had the silly thought that if I saw a young boy gazing longingly at an instrument through a window, I would have to buy it for him, but sadly I didn't see any such movie-like situations.

“Master, there are many soldiers, I report.”

Nana was right: There were a lot of guards out in the city today.

The number of them in the nobles' quarters was significantly higher than normal, and even on the main street, I saw several squads of fully-armed knights on horseback. It must be because of yesterday's red-rope incident.

“Mew?”

“Noisy, sir.”

Tama and Pochi looked nervously toward the road on our left that led out to the main street.

Three suspicious-looking men were running in our direction, shoving pedestrians out of the way. Behind them, loudly shouting knights gave chase.

““““Outta the waaay!””””

“Bloooocked...?”

“You can't pass, sirs!”

“Dear me, how impudent.”

Tama and Pochi took down the men on the left and right, while Lady Karina knocked out the man in the middle with a spinning kick.

We turned the men over to the guards who caught up shortly after.

“That was so cool, girls!”

“That chick with the big boobs is crazy strong!”

“I'd like to have my son marry her.”

“Pretty lady, you ruuule...”

A cheering crowd gathered around, making Lady Karina squirm in embarrassment.

Unfortunately, this made her look even more adorable to the crowd, whose cheers intensified until she reached her limit and ran away.

“Karinaaa...”

“Karina, wait! Sir!”

Tama and Pochi went running after her.

Realizing they’d overdone it, the crowd looked sheepish and gradually broke up.

“Sorry, Liza, but could you go after them?”

“Of course, sir.”

Liza chased after the three.

“Thank you for assisting us in arresting those scoundrels,” the man who seemed to be the leader of the guards said to me.

Behind us, the guards were interrogating the tied-up suspects.

“Spit it out! Who was the client?!”

“Beats me! Whaddaya mean?!”

“Don’t play dumb! We know you transported some suspicious tools in the underground tunnels last night!”

Suspicious tools in underground tunnels?

Were these guys actually responsible for the monster incidents yesterday?

“Thank you again for your help!” the leader repeated to me. “Might I ask your name?”

“Oh, we were just passing through,” I responded with a smile, then took my leave.

Out of curiosity, I stayed nearby and listened in while waiting for Lady Karina and the others to return.

“If we don’t tell you who the client was, you’ll hang us instead...?”

At that threat, one of the men reluctantly muttered, “It was some high-class guy.”

“And his name?”

“No idea. The guy who hired us was some snobby old coot who introduced himself as ‘a servant to a high-class fellow.’”

He said it was a middle-aged man without any particularly distinguishing qualities.

“You didn’t follow him?”

Unable to resist my curiosity, I interjected with the help of my “Interrogation” skill.

“Sure we did. The person who was waiting for the client yelled at him by name, all right?”

“And that name was?”

“I’ll tell you if you let me go—gah!”

As the man started trying to negotiate, the guards kicked him mercilessly, trying to get him to spill the information.

I wished they wouldn’t use such violent techniques in public; they might scar any children who happened to see it.

“Sir Pendragon, and Miss Pochi and Miss Tama, thank you so much for your help!”

“Eh-heh-heh, sir!”

“Nyeh-heh-heh...”

Pochi and Tama giggled bashfully at the guard leader’s praise.

Just as a veritable torture session was starting in the street, Pochi and Tama came back with Lady Karina in tow. I quickly put them to work as the “merciless torturers Pochi and Tama” to demonstrate a better torture method.

“Pochi is a tickling pro, sir!”

“Coochy-cooo...?”

Seeing the two girls wriggle their fingers, the stern faces of the guards broke into smiles.

“Now our investigation can continue. If you’ll excuse us.”

The guards bowed to us and left—dragging the captured men along with them, of course.

“They said the last name was Merkray, right? Do you think that’s really who’s behind the monster outbreaks?”

“I doubt they’ll get arrested on a single testimony.”

That was a major noble family, after all.

“But isn’t that particular noble famous for bad behavior?” Lady Karina asked.

I explained to her that if there wasn’t any evidence, they would likely talk their way out of it.

I tried searching the map, but none of the members or servants of the Merkray family belonged to the demon lord—worshipping Light of Freedom guild, and I didn’t see any demonic potions or ingredients in their homes or storehouses.

Although they were in a gray zone for sure, there was no proof that they were absolutely evil.

I could probably just wait for the prime minister’s spies and guards to figure it out.

Even snooping with my Space Magic spells like Clairvoyance and Clairaudience, I didn’t catch any conveniently suspicious conversations or scenes.

“Meeeat...?”

“Mr. Bug Legs, sir.”

As we walked toward the main street where our carriage was waiting, Tama and Pochi pointed at a cart covered with cloth. The leg of an insect-like monster was peeking out from a tear in the fabric. They must be transported monster

corpses.

“Looks like some of the dead monsters from yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Arisa tilted her head. “But this place is quite far away from where we were yesterday, isn’t it?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? There were several other monster outbreaks yesterday besides the one that we ran into.”

I repeated the information from the prime minister to my group.

Since Lady Karina was also with us, I didn’t mention who I’d heard it from.

“Let’s go to the scene of the crime! They say criminals always return there!” Arisa cried, and so we set out in the carriage to tour the sites of the incidents.

Many of them—four of the five, in fact—were in the lower part of the city.

Guards had blocked off the areas of the monster attacks, and we even saw some priestesses from nearby temples performing purifications on the area.

“Master, over there.”

At one of the locations, Liza whispered to me and pointed discreetly at a weaselfolk man in a hooded cloak.

He seemed to be using a recognition-inhibiting item, but my AR told me that his real identity was the same mage I’d seen at the Sahbe Company.

“Satou.”

“Master, suspicious persons spotted, I report.”

This time, Mia and Nana were pointing at a group of men in robes with hoods pulled low over their eyes. According to my AR display, they were members of the casual occult group Wind of Freedom.

“Oh, don’t worry about them,” I said.

No doubt they were just exchanging conspiracy theories and fantasies about the strange incidents.



“Master, what is that?”

As we passed a park nearby, Lulu tugged my sleeve.

I whirled around, expecting some new commotion, but...

“Is that...*kamishibai*?”

“Wow, I didn’t know they had that here, too.”

It looked strikingly similar to a Japanese form of street theater, not unlike a puppet show but with paper characters and backgrounds. I asked the driver to stop so we could get out.

“Oh? There’s a snake charmer here, too.”

“Maybe they’re in vogue right now?”

There were other street performers practicing here and there, too.

We chatted about it as we walked toward the *kamishibai* storyteller.

“Larvae!” Nana exclaimed.

The storyteller was surrounded by an audience of children.

“Candy is one penny coin apiece! Kids who buy candy can sit up front, the rest in back.”

It appeared that the performance itself was free, with the money for candy being the performer’s main source of income.

“Wow, that’s amazing... Wonder if it’s candied plums?”

“Candied plums? Nope, only syrup candy here.”

The storyteller opened the jar hanging from his neck and showed us the candy inside.

It wasn’t the kind of transparent *mizuame* syrup you’d see in modern Japan, but the slightly brown-tinted malt candy we’d seen back in Ougoch Duchy.

“I’ll buy one for everyone.”

“Thank ya kindly!”

I handed over a silver coin. Rather than get change back, I asked him to give a piece to each of the kids gathered around the little theater instead.

I'd feel awkward if we were the only ones who got candy.

"Long, long ago...in the times before the capital was moved here, this was a dangerous place, where monsters from the Azure Lands attacked almost every day."

The *kamishibai* storyteller began his tale. The title was "The Ancestral King and the Evil Ghost King."

"Then one day, who should arrive but..."

"The ancestral king!"

"Lord Yamato!"

"The kiiiing."

The children, who must have seen this many times already, called out before the storyteller could finish his sentence.

"Yes, indeed. It was none other than our great ancestral king, who defeated the great demon lord and founded the Shiga Kingdom!"

The kids cheered at the storyteller's dramatic proclamation.

As the story went on, parents who had lost their children to monsters, kids whose parents had been killed by monsters, and other such victims asked the ancestral king Yamato to do something about the monsters that kept coming from the Azure Lands.

But the newly formed kingdom didn't have enough military might to fight them all off, leaving the people disappointed with their king.

Then, just as the king was lamenting this powerlessness in the royal castle...

"Out of nowhere, a voice spoke to the ancestral king: 'O great leader of humanity.' The ancestral king followed the voice deep into the forest, where a maiden stood waiting!"

The storyteller made sound effects with a small gadget.

"'Gather the holy vessels from the fallen kingdom of the Azure Lands. Once you have collected enough, I shall teach you how to perform a ritual that will prevent monsters from approaching.' With that, the girl vanished, even as the

ancestral king exclaimed, 'Please tell me your name!' And so the king sent a team of powerful knights to the remains of the Flue Empire in the great desert to search for holy vessels."

Yikes. I know this is fiction, but that's a pretty harsh order.

Maybe this story is based on those English legends about knights and kings?

"'O maiden! I have gathered the vessels!' the ancestral king declared on a hill, and sure enough, the girl appeared in a flash of light."

A paper depicting a triangle of yellow light was added to the scene, then taken out of the frame to reveal the maiden. He probably took out another layer of paper along with the triangle to create that effect.

"'So you have fulfilled your end of the pact. Now allow me to fulfill mine,' the maiden said, and lo! She was surrounded by light and became a giant Holy Grail!"

The storyteller used an instrument hanging from his belt to create a *dun-dun!* sound, drawing the children into the story so raptly that they forgot to keep eating their candy.

"'O priestesses, use these Holy Chalicees to help the great ancestral king. O king, use the power contained within them to fend off the monsters,' said the maiden, and the priestesses began the ceremony. They gathered all the wickedness and evil spirits that attract monsters into the Holy Chalicees and transformed them into a giant black beast."

This was punctuated with an imitation of a fearsome roar.

The more easily frightened children covered their ears and closed their eyes, while the older kids watched more intently so they wouldn't miss a single moment of the climax.

"This beast attacked the priestesses who were performing the ritual before the holy vessels! But of course, they were in the presence of the greatest hero of all time! A king among kings! Our great ancestral founder! The ancestral king drew the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis, jumped in front of the monster, and —*KER-SLASH!*—cut it right in two!"

The storyteller swiftly swapped in a picture of the ancestral king cutting the giant monster in half and used a cymbal-like instrument attached to the picture stage to create a crashing sound.

“The ancestral king’s so coooool!”

“When I grow up, I’m gonna be a knight and serve the king!”

“Me too!”

The boys and girls alike gazed at the image of the ancestral king and the Holy Sword with sparkling eyes.

“Thus, the monsters were banished from this land forevermore, and the ancestral king created a new royal capital in this very place!”

“That’s why there’s no monsters in the royal capital!”

“My mommy said the royal capital is the only place with safe farmland outside the city walls, too.”

“Boooo, I knew that.”

The children gleefully exchanged their own pieces of knowledge, no longer listening to the storyteller, even though he was still speaking.

“Well, at any rate, the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony is still held every year on New Year’s Eve. It is a day to celebrate the ancestral king’s greatness and pray to the gods.”

Wrapping up the story, the storyteller explained this last part to the kids.

“My family’s gonna go to Parion Temple.”

“We worship our statue of the ancestral king at home.”

“Well, *we’re* going to Garleon Temple.”

I hadn’t realized that the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony was so well-known among the general public of the royal capital.

“It was a bit long-winded, but not half-bad, I suppose,” Arisa commented airily.

“That’s not true, sir! It was very, very interesting and good, sir!” Pochi

responded fervently. “We can’t just sit around, sir! Pochi’s creative urges are on fire, sir!”

This performance appeared to have stirred Pochi’s story-loving soul.

I watched fondly as Pochi’s eyes blazed with excitement, and we went back to our royal capital mansion right away.



“Now then, what shall we do today?”

There were three days left until New Year’s Eve, and we had the peerage and promotion ceremonies on New Year’s Day, but no major plans until then.

Some of my acquaintances, like the nobles I knew from the old capital and Mrs. Ema Litton and her friends, sent me invitations to everything from evening parties to daytime tea parties and garden parties. I only attended some of them, though; too much partying in a row was exhausting.

If possible, I wanted to meet with Viscount Siemmen and request some new scrolls before the end of the year. However, we were having trouble lining up our schedules, since the end of the year was a busy time for behind-the-scenes work for upper nobles.

Viscount Nina of the Muno Barony was hard at work, too, and even the normally laid-back and timid Baron Muno himself was doing his best for the sake of his people and his family.

“I’m going to do some paperwork for Miss Nina this morning. Then in the afternoon, the Echigoya Company is having an information session about the franchising, so I’m going to go observe that as well.”

Arisa had her hands full, too.

“I’m thinking of researching *osechi* dishes for New Year’s until the holiday arrives.”

“I’ll come help out when I can.”

“Thank you!”

Lulu smiled brightly.

The only recipes we had for *osechi*, the traditional Japanese New Year's dishes, were given to us by the elf chef Ms. Nea, but they were almost laughably inaccurate imitations of the real thing.

Unfortunately, neither Arisa nor I knew any *osechi* recipes, and the ones left by previous heroes and reincarnations were few and far between.

However, I was going to borrow a collection of recipes from the old capital's food-loving noble pair, Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen. They should be arriving on an airship tomorrow.

"Concert hall."

Mia wanted to perform on the stage at the concert hall again.

"Pochi is writing with fiery passion, sir!"

Evidently, Pochi was still working on a novel after being struck by inspiration yesterday.

"I wish to frolic with larvae, I declare."

"Are you visiting some orphanages? There are a few different ones between the temples and the government and such."

I used my map search to find one that was close to our mansion and in a safe area, the Parion Temple orphanage.

Since I hadn't yet gone to any temples to make donations, I decided to accompany her there so I could do just that.

"Tama, are you sculpting today?"

"Aye." Tama nodded.

"And Ms. Liza? A food tour, maybe?"

"No, I could use a bit more exercise. I'm going to practice with my spear somewhere."

"How about the Holy Knights' garrison?"

"Goodness, no. I'd hate to have to turn them down if they invite me to join, and I prefer not to attract unwanted attention."

Unlike Labyrinth City, there weren't many places to practice with a spear in the royal capital except for private land, martial arts halls, and military training grounds.

And while there were plenty of martial arts halls around, it would be considered a challenge if you showed up to one whose style you didn't practice, which ruled them out as an option.

"No need to worry. I know a discreet area near the outer walls."

Liza described a place she'd found on her morning marathons.

It sounded fine for practicing form, but someone as powerful as Liza couldn't exactly go all out there.

I decided to look for a place where she and the others could train after I escorted everyone.



"Master."

Nana called out to me near the temple.

After I took Arisa, Tama, and Mia to their respective activities, I came to the nearby Parion Temple with Nana. In the enormous royal capital, there were four temples for Parion alone; the one nearest our mansion was the second largest.

"Seems like a quiet place."

"Yes, master."

It wasn't quite what I'd expected, considering that Oracle shrine maidens had been fainting and the priestesses were declaring, "Unprecedented danger is approaching the royal capital."

Maybe that really was just a line to garner more donations, like I'd heard someone say.

"I hear the larvae calling, I report."

Oof, that line sounded like something out of a horror game involving a sanity meter.

Nana was clearly itching to follow the sound of children's voices in the orphanage behind the temple.

"Wait, Nana. Let's make donations at the temple first."

That way, I figured we were less likely to be reported to the guards as suspicious intruders. I took Nana's hand and dragged her into the temple, where I donated a small pouch full of gold coins.

"We were hoping to observe the temple orphanage if possible..."

For some reason, that request changed the priest's expression of barely suppressed glee at the large sum to one of knowing comprehension.

Confused though I was, I followed him along with Nana to the orphanage.

"Master, Lawrence is here surrounded by larvae, I report."

At that, I peeked beyond the hedges and saw Lawrence—Arisa's nickname for Cardinal Hozzunas—playing with a gaggle of orphanage children.

"Your Grace, allow me to introduce Sir Pendragon of the Muno Barony, who offered a generous donation to the temple. Sir Knight, this is His Grace Cardinal Hozzunas of the Parion Province."

The priest introduced us.

He must have misunderstood my donation as a request to be introduced to the cardinal.

"We meet again, Sir Pendragon."

"It is an honor as always, Your Grace."

Nana was fidgeting eagerly as we greeted each other, so I got the priestesses' permission and sent her to play with the children.

"Is that lovely young lady your bride-to-be?"

"No, she's a fellow explorer, something like a family member. Do you come here regularly, Your Grace?"

"Indeed. Not every day, but it is a clergyman's duty to commune with these young minds directly and tell them of the holy teachings."

I wish that priest was half this pious.

“Your Grace...”

A priestess who was on standby between the orphanage and the temple called out to the cardinal.

“Is it that late already? My apologies, Sir Pendragon. I would have liked to discuss faith with you a little longer, but it seems my time is up.”

The cardinal excused himself apologetically and left the orphanage with the priestess.

Based on their conversation that I overheard with my “Keen Hearing” skill, they were heading to the largest Parion Temple in the royal capital for a meeting about the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony.

“Master! May I feed the children some candy, I inquire?”

I first asked the priestess-in-training who was watching them, then told Nana she could give them one each so they wouldn’t get cavities. Noticing the young priestess-in-training’s envious expression, I gave her one of the candies, too.

After watching over Nana and the children for a while, I returned to our manor.



“There’s no one here, even though it’s not far from the royal capital.”

“Just so, master.”

Once I got back, I brought Liza with me to a teleport point on the outskirts of the city using the Return spell, and we made our way to one of the monster territories south of the capital.

This desolate valley was surrounded on all sides by the territories of other monsters.

It should be a safe place for my group to train in combat.

“Master, a three-headed hydra.”

Three heads were peeking out of a swamp nearby. It was hard to tell since the rest of it was underwater, but it looked like the hydras here didn’t have wings,

unlike the ones in the Muno Barony.

“Looks like that swamp is this territory’s magic pool.”

This was the perfect place to set up our secret base: We could get here with just one use of the Return spell from the royal capital, and it had its own magic pool—a small-scale mana source.

“Shall I remove any monsters that might be a nuisance?”

I almost felt like we were the bad guys here, but I gave Liza the go-ahead. We were running low on all that hydra meat we used to have anyway.

“Yeah, thanks. Can you lead the monster out into the wasteland before you defeat it? I want to check out that swamp.”

“Understood.”

Liza used her ring to produce a stone spear and throw it at the hydra, angering it and guiding it to an open area.

After investigating with my map, I used spells like Clairvoyance and See Through to inspect the muddy swamp and the surrounding area and finally used Magic Hand to collect all the monster bones at the bottom of the swamp into Storage.

Those were probably the hydra’s victims.

There were some human bones and rusted equipment in there, too. They were pretty old, but since some of them were daggers with identifying crests and such, I put them away to return to the families anonymously.

A small stream of water flowed out of the swamp; the gap created by the giant hydra leaving had already filled back up. I didn’t see any river flowing into it. There must be a water source at the bottom of the swamp.

“The miasma’s thick here...”

With my “Miasma Vision,” I saw that the entire swamp was covered in dense miasma, which I cleaned up by unleashing my spirit light, which was usually suppressed.

It would take a few hours for the purification to finish, but by the time it was

done, it should become a nice fairy fountain where small spirits would gather.

By the time I had finished my initial investigation, Liza came back, wearing a big smile.

“Master, I have defeated the hydra. I took care not to damage the eyeballs or poison sac.”

“Thank you, Liza. I’ll go recover the hydra, if you could please explore the area. Keep in mind that we want to make it our training ground as you investigate.”

“Understood.”

Once Liza headed out, I went to retrieve the hydra.

She had set aside its three eyes, heart, and liver and removed the large red core. I decided to make it for dinner tonight, as she was no doubt looking forward to it.

“First of all, I guess I’ll check out my new scrolls.”

I had to make a base here, too, but that should be easy enough with the Stone Object spell, and there was plenty of time. It was probably safe to prioritize the fun part.

Number one was the composite spell Create House from the Overgrown Labyrinth.

“Yikes, that’s shabby.”

When I used the scroll, it produced a crudely made hut of wood and straw.

The entrance was so small that even I had to duck to go in, and it was barely big enough for one person to lie down inside. There were gaps between the straw in the ceiling that looked like they would easily let in rain.

I checked that the Create House spell had been registered to my magic menu and used it from there this time.

An image of a house appeared in my mind.

The hut that the scroll had made appeared to be the default; I could alter the design at will.

I had total freedom to make anything from a two-story house to a luxurious mansion. I could even add things like glass windows and chandeliers, though sadly there was no option for setting magic tools inside.

“Wow, it can make a hundred-square-yard single-family home in an instant.”

In under thirty seconds, the spell materialized the kind of generic home you often saw in modern Japan. It was fun to watch the framework and pieces rapidly put themselves together.

Unfortunately, it wasn't completely perfect. It came equipped with a bathroom, but you would have to attach it to a water supply and a sewage system to avoid things simply leaking out of the house.

“It can make multi-story buildings, too? I wonder...”

I tested it out and found that it could make a house even in the water—or a swamp. While it was totally waterproof, there were still issues like air supply and how to get in and out, making it a less than practical choice.

Still, it was definitely convenient and a lot more flexible for making houses specifically than Stone Object. Making overly elaborate constructions cost a lot of magic, but that wouldn't be a problem for me: With my ridiculous amount of MP, I could easily make a dozen or so mansions without breaking a sweat.

Number two was the Earth Magic spell Cultivation, also from the Overgrown Labyrinth.

The scroll only tilled a square of earth about the size of a kitchen garden, but once I registered it to my menu, I could use it to till up to thirty acres—ten times the size of a schoolyard—in one go.

“Wow, it's so soft.”

Where the ground had been dry and gritty before, the Cultivation spell turned it into soft, dark, mulch-like dirt.

I guessed that it must be the same effect as the “Improve Farmland” series of options in the City Core menu.

After testing it out a few times, I found that I could set the cultivation area by opening my map when I used the spell and designating it with lines.

With this method, I realized I could forcibly cultivate areas that would normally be excluded by default, like shrubbery, rocks, and even structures and slopes.

Unlike removing a few roots, cultivating areas with actual trees or large rocks greatly reduced the range, but the default upper limit seemed ridiculously large to me as a Japanese person anyway.

If I combined this Cultivation spell with Create House, I could develop a whole new village in no time flat.

Oh, I know.

Maybe I could sneakily use these spells to help out Sir Gouen, who was being sent to the undeveloped Azure Lands as punishment for his involvement in the attack on Vistall Duchy.

He wasn't being sent out until the turmoil in the Duchy settled down, but still, I wanted to secretly lend him a hand when the time came.

Now, time for number three.

I chose the last Overgrown Labyrinth scroll, the Summoning Magic spell Summon Bat.

With the scroll, all I could summon was a single palm-size level-1 Small Bat. On top of that, when I summoned it, it just flew off somewhere.

Still, I had high hopes when I used Summon Bat from the magic menu.

Summoning targets appeared in my mind for me to choose from. In addition to the Small Bat from before, I had four new options: Flock of Bats, Giant Bat, Messenger Bat, and Shadowdive Bat. I could also dismiss any bats I had already summoned.

The Small Bat was the same size as before, but it was now level 10 and could obey simple orders.

As the name implied, Flock of Bats could summon anywhere from two to a hundred and twenty Small Bats. I could only give orders to the entire group, not individuals.

When I summoned the flock, the Small Bat I had summoned before it

vanished into thin air. So this spell couldn't do multiple summons, then.

Out of curiosity, I put a marker on a Small Bat and tied a ribbon around its leg before dismissing it, but the marker disappeared as soon as I did so. When I resummoned the Small Bat, the marker didn't return, and of course there was no ribbon anymore, either.

Now I was curious whether the marker disappeared when it was dismissed or whether the Small Bat itself was permanently gone after dismissal. Since I had no way of verifying, I would have to do some research in the spellbooks next time I went to the forbidden library.

For now, I continued testing out Summon Bat.

The Giant Bat was a large level-10 bat with a wingspan about as wide as my outstretched arms. Like the Small Bat, it could obey simple orders, and I could even see through its eyes like the golems I made with Earth Magic.

In the case of the summoned bats, they were treated as familiars when I borrowed their vision; my name appeared in their detail information. It was possible to keep the summoner's name from showing up when I summoned them initially, but then I could no longer give orders to the bats I summoned.

The Messenger Bat worked like a carrier pigeon, although just like an ordinary bird, you had to thoroughly teach it its destination in advance. That would make it hard to use—at least, until I realized I could open my map at the same time and send it to anywhere I designated on the map, which made it infinitely more convenient. I pretended not to notice that both its flying range and speed were less than that of a pigeon.

The Shadowdive Bat was a mysterious bat that could indeed sink into shadows and even infiltrate areas I designated on the map or through shared vision by traveling through shadows. Since I could also give it simple orders, it could be very useful for sneaking and spying.

I mean, I could do the same things with Space Magic, but still.

Scroll number four was the Practical Magic spell Rolling Gear, from the Illusion Labyrinth.

It made a transparent gear appear in midair that spun for a few seconds and

then disappeared.

When I used it from the magic menu, I could summon up to thirty-two gears ranging from one millimeter to twelve meters in size. I was able to change the speed and direction of the summoned gears' rotation; by raising it to max speed, they could function as an electric saw.

The speed and rotation could be set at the time of summoning, but I had to be touching the gear to change those settings afterward. Touching them through the use of Magic Hand counted, though, so I didn't have to worry about accidentally hurting myself.

As they would continue to spin as long as they were provided with magic, I might be able to use them like water wheels or wind turbines or even to make a giant clock.

Even though I wasn't expecting much out of this one, I was pleasantly surprised to find that it might have a variety of uses.

Maybe I'll try making a water pump or flower clock connected to the magic pool first?

The last scroll was the Ghost Magic spell Bonecraft.

I tried it on some monster bones from Storage first. Unfortunately, I couldn't control it very well and wound up making some weird, twisted thing.

> Skill Acquired: "Ghost Magic"

I put points into my newly acquired magic skill and activated it.

Then I tried using Bonecraft from the magic menu.

Now I could actually manipulate bone with ease. It was almost like working with clay.

I'd been wanting to try this spell since I saw accessories made of bone at a stall in Labyrinth City a while back.

The spell worked on bone, horns, claws, scales, and so on. I was surprised to find that it could even alter the fragments of claws and fangs from the Evil Dragon of the labyrinth's Lower Stratum.

“This would’ve made crafting that dragon spear a whole lot easier...”

Feeling painfully aware of the importance of tools, I brought out some things I’d kept stashed away in Storage and fiddled around with them.

Putting the Evil Dragon spear away in Storage, I played with making swords out of hydra fangs, fortress tiger tusks, and so on.

“...Huh?”

The things I made with concentration came out normal, but when I made weapons or armor based on only a vague idea, they wound up looking evil for some reason.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t add on magic circuits during production; if I flowed magic power into them as I worked, though, the core-like components of the monster pieces would crystallize and create pseudo–Magic Swords that were easy to charge with magic.

That wasn’t a big deal since I could make Magic Swords anyway, but it might be nice for making presents for people or things to hide in labyrinth treasure chests. Unlike the Magic Swords I made from molds, they wouldn’t come out all that strong unless I chose the wrong materials.



The next morning, after I pulled an all-nighter working on it, I brought everyone to the base.

“Lots of spirits.”

Mia nodded in satisfaction as she looked at our new base.

“Ooh, I see. You grew ivy and creeping plants around it so people can’t see the house from the outside.”

Arisa crossed her arms and murmured approvingly. Tama and Pochi imitated her pose on either side, nodding along wisely.

“Master, is that a vegetable garden?”

“That’s right. We can grow whatever vegetables or flowers you want, Lulu.”

Lulu’s eyes sparkled as she admired the freshly tilled plot.

“Master, the golem is covered in moss, I report.”

Nana pointed at a defense golem I’d disguised with plants.

“I made it that way on purpose.”

“Understood, I affirm.”

Nana gazed at the defense golem; it appeared she was oddly fond of it.

“What are we going to use this place for?”

“Whatever we want, I guess? Since there’s no one around, we’re free to train, perform, sculpt, or do anything we like.”

As the group celebrated, I reminded them not to tell anyone else about this place.

“Not even Karinaaa?”

“It feels mean to leave her out, sir.”

I knew Tama and Pochi were going to say that.

Before I could figure out how to convince them, Arisa stepped in for me.

“This is Team Pendragon’s secret base, you guys. So we can’t tell Lady Karina about it until she’s strong enough to join Team Pendragon, okay?”

“Master, may I show everyone the training grounds?”

I nodded at Liza, and she ran up the slope of the valley to show the vanguard the training area in the wasteland at the top.

There were areas for Tama’s ninja training, Pochi’s sword-drawing practice, and so on.

It wasn’t quite spacious enough to use the Acceleration Gun, but I did set up a field for Lulu’s target practice.

“This is a pretty little spot, though. I’m surprised no one else was using it, even if it is in the middle of monster territory.”

“Spirits look happy.”

The marshy area Arisa and Mia were admiring was now full of crystal-clear water instead of a muddy swamp. It was probably because my spirit light

finished cleansing the miasma.

“I know you didn’t want the teleport point to stand out, but isn’t it a little too small?”

Arisa was critically looking around the hut-size base.

“On the surface, yeah. The rest of it is underground.”

I had used the Earth Magic spell Pitfall to dig out several large shafts, carved some hardy Meteor Shower meteorites into a foundation with Stone Object, and made a five-floor underground structure with Create House. The water and ventilation were taken care of by Rolling Gears that attached to the magic pool.

On top of that, I connected a “False Core” like the one in the Ivy Manor to the magic pool, controlling things within the base like automatic doors, lights, surveillance and alarms, and so on.

“This is the pièce de résistance.”

“A mirror? Wait...could it be?!”

I nodded at Arisa, who appeared to have caught on to the true nature of the silver mirror.

“Yep, it’s a permanent teleport gate.”

It was identical to one in the Ivy Manor; when I brought Nana’s sisters to the Bolenan Forest to train, I got them to share an extra with me. I could theoretically make something like it myself, but it would involve a lot of complicated and annoying work, which was why I opted to use one that already existed.

“Now everyone can come and go from the royal capital manor even without me or Arisa.”

Unlike Teleportation Magic or the teleport gate under the old capital, this could only be used as a wormhole-like portal door between two fixed points.

“It could be good for emergency evacuation, too.”

Emergency? Oh, that’s right...

“Arisa, would you be able to store an airship in your Garage space?”

That would certainly be useful for relocating or escaping in emergencies.

That wasn't necessary as long as I was around, but we weren't together all the time.

"Sure, it should fit. All that's in there right now is sand for sand golems and stones for rock bombing."

Arisa's Garage spell was advanced Space Magic that created an alternate dimension for her use alone. Magic power was required for opening and closing the entrance. Unlike the "Item Box" skill, though, it didn't use any magic for taking items out or putting them in and could store living things and golems.

"All right, I'll take it out."

I took out the airship in an open area. With pure-white sails made from the hide of the giant monster fish and glittering gold orichalcum decorations, it made for an impressive sight.

While the steering was simple enough, I had declared the controls off-limits to Tama (who was overly fond of acrobatic movements) and Pochi (who became a completely different person when she got to drive). I planned to put Arisa or Liza in charge of steering if we got into combat.

"Oh? Did you move the six-chambered Magic Cannons that were loaded onto the flying ship?"

Lulu was in charge of fire control, although I was thinking of having Pochi and Tama take care of the multi-mounted Magic Cannons and defenses. Those two really loved reloading the cannons.

I planned to have Mia monitor the air defense radar, but she might not get to do much since Tama's impressive instincts tended to pick up on things first.

"Yeah, and I put Nana's Mobile Fortress on there, too, along with the Castle prototype. It has three times the defense of Fortress."

This was something I'd developed along with some research-loving elves and high elves in the elf village.

Since they were surprisingly hard to control, Nana would probably end up in charge of that along with controlling the engine room.

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“Its functionality is, anyway. It’s still too big to put into gold armor, but it’ll at least fit on an airship. Plus it’s got plenty of large Holytree Stone furnaces.”

This airship had sixteen Holytree Stone furnaces, eight times as many as the gold armor I’d designed, which was more than enough power.

“Think it’ll fit in your Garage?”

“It’s bigger than I thought, but it’ll fit if I take the stones out.”

“Ooh, rooocks...?”

Tama’s eyes sparkled with excitement at the pile of large stones Arisa produced.

“You’re more than welcome to use them for carving, if you’d like.”

“Yaaay...”

Tama jumped up and down in glee at Arisa’s generous words.

It was just about time for breakfast. I called Liza and the others back, and we returned to the royal capital mansion.

“Have we always had a room like this?” Arisa tilted her head.

“The stairs going up are at the end of that hallway.”

This was a new space I’d made under the garden with the Stone Object spell. The stairs led to a hidden door in my study.

I’d already set up powerful adamantite golems to guard the teleport mirror and set them to allow any of our group to come and go freely.

Since the lock on the hidden door itself was controlled by the scarecrow surveillance golem, these were really just an extra precaution anyway.

“Cooo...”

“Coo-coo, sir.”

“Mrrr. Coo-woo.”

When we came out into the office, Tama, Pochi, and Mia were having a conversation that gave me déjà vu.

“What’s up?”

“I think it’s a carrier pigeon. Look, on its leg...”

Lulu pointed at a bird sitting outside the window.

She was right: Under its colorful feathers, the pigeon had a small cylinder attached to its leg.

I opened the window, and it flew right to my hand.

As soon as I removed the cylinder and took out the folded-up letter, the pigeon turned into a puff of white smoke and vanished.

“Gooone...?”

“It disappeared, sir!”

“Wow, just like a *shikigami*. Maybe it’s a kind of Summoning Magic?”

“Mrr, spirit?”

While Tama and Pochi exclaimed in shock, Arisa’s and Mia’s theories were rooted in magical disciplines.

I looked over the letter as the girls chattered beside me.

“Well, how about that...”

The letter was from a very unexpected source.

The Hapless Detective

Satou here. Detectives in stories are always running into some crime or other, to the point where people even call some characters “mystery magnets.” I envy their ability to identify the culprit every time, but I wouldn’t want to be in their position in the first place.

“Who’s it from?”

“Princess Sistina, it seems.”

I told Arisa who had sent the carrier pigeon letter.

“Adultery.”

“It’s not like that. Here, have a look.”

“An investigation?”

The letter was a request to help her investigate the red-rope monster incidents.

“I thought the princess was investigating the reason the cherry blossoms aren’t blooming?”

“Sounds like she thinks the monsters might have something to do with it.”

I showed Arisa the letter, too.

“Huh. And here I thought it was just an excuse to ensnare you, master.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Although I guess that wouldn’t be too surprising after her behavior last time.

As we were finishing breakfast, the princess arrived in a carriage.

It was a six-person carriage, with four imperial knights as guards.

“Lord Satou! I’ve come to fetch you!”

The princess waved from the window of the carriage. Her glasses today had

an unusual pinkish-gold frame, possibly to match her cherry blossom-colored dress. My AR told me it was a crimson ore alloy, which must have been quite expensive.

Taking one look at the princess's gleeful demeanor, Arisa immediately said, "On second thought, I'll come with you."

"What about helping Miss Nina and the Echigoya Company?"

Most of the group's plans that I'd heard over breakfast were similar to the day before.

"Nnngh... No, preventing you from cheating is more important."

"Mm, agreed."

Mia nodded and grabbed my hand tightly, as if to say that she insisted on coming as well.

Seeing this, Liza and Nana and the others started saying they would come as guards, but if we were trying to investigate a possible crime, it would be best not to travel in a large group.

"Is something the matter, Lord Satou?"

The princess descended from the carriage, accompanied by two ladies-in-waiting and a pink-haired mage: Ms. Athena, the Sakura Protector.

"So you're coming, too, Bolenan elf? I'll be the one to solve this mystery!"

"Mrr."

Athena immediately started goading Mia.

"My, will you be accompanying us, Lady Misanaria?" The princess clapped her hands together. "How very exciting."

"And I'm Arisa, Lady Misanaria's lady-in-waiting," Arisa added smoothly, securing herself a spot.

The princess's carriage was only meant for six people; small as they were, Arisa and Mia were still over the limit.

"Lord Satou, are you not uncomfortable?"

“Thank you for your concern, but there’s no need to worry. They’re both quite small.”

Since the benches were designed for two adults, I was only mildly cramped with Mia and Arisa on either side of me. The only real problem was Arisa trying to use it as an excuse to cop a feel.

“Please feel free to speak up if the need arises. There’s still room on the coachman’s seat.”

The harsher-looking lady-in-waiting spoke up from behind us.

At first I thought it was a roundabout way of saying I should go sit up front, until the other, gentler lady-in-waiting kindly added, “No need to hold back on our account. We’re used to the coachman’s seat.”

I waved to our watching friends, and the carriage set out with the imperial knights on either side.

“I do hope my sudden invitation wasn’t an inconvenience?”

“Not at all. I’m honored.”

Even if it had been inconvenient, a low-ranking honorary knight could hardly reject an invitation from royalty.

“But may I ask why you are performing the investigation, Your Highness?”

I figured if I didn’t say something, she’d immediately launch into discussing spells.

“To fulfill our promise to the ancestral king.”

The princess’s eyes glittered, and Athena nodded proudly as well.

“The promise has been in place since the ancestral king Yamato abdicated the throne to the second king, King Sharorik the First. ‘Make sure the Holy Sakura Tree blooms every year.’ Keeping this promise has always fallen to the royal family and to Sakura Protectors like Athena.”

Ah, so that’s why they have a knowledgeable princess representing the royal family.

“I believe I may have asked this before, but is investigating the red-rope

monsters related to helping the cherry blossoms bloom?”

“Indeed. We believe these monsters may be deeply involved in the reason the Holy Sakura Tree has not yet bloomed.”

“Mrr?” Mia looked up at my face.

After all, she knew I’d already resolved the problem with the Holy Sakura Tree—the Royal Sakura—by fixing the issues with the earthen vein as the sakura dryad requested.

I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to privately tell Mia, *“What happened with the sakura dryad is a secret.”*

“So where will we begin the investigation?”

“At the royal research lab, of course!”

Evidently, we were going to start with the red-rope monster corpses and the remains of the magic tools found near the places where they had appeared.



“Here.”

Mia hopped down from the carriage.

Ms. Athena hurriedly jumped down after her and puffed up her chest. It was cute to see someone who looked roughly high school-aged getting competitive with a girl who looked like she was in elementary school.

The smiling coachman brought out a step stool and helped the princess and her ladies-in-waiting descend.

“Master, help me.”

Glancing at the stool, Arisa held out her hand as if demanding to be escorted.

“Sure thing.”

I picked her up by the waist and put her on the ground.

“That’s! Not! What! !! Meant!”

Arisa flailed in protest, emphasizing each syllable, but I just grinned and ignored her.

“Hand.”

Jealous of Arisa, Mia insisted on holding my hand as we walked toward the royal research institute.

As we entered the hall, there was a quick shuffle of footsteps from within, and an older man dressed like a scientist emerged. My AR display told me he was the head of this institution.

“Good heavens, Princess Sistina! What an honor to have you grace our humble halls with your presence, Your Highness.”

“I would not refer to the greatest shrine to knowledge in the kingdom as ‘humble.’” The princess’s voice was cold, a stark contrast to how she normally spoke to me. “The red-rope monsters were brought here, correct? I wish to examine them. Lead the way.”

Her expression was cool as she gave the order.

“Th-the monster corpses, Your Highness?”

“What about them?”

“Th-they are hardly in any state to show to a princess such as yourself...”

The head researcher scrambled to dissuade the haughty princess.

“Head researcher. Her Highness has ordered you to guide her somewhere. Cease your prattling and lead us there at once,” the harsher lady-in-waiting ordered.

“B-but of course.”

Since she was the daughter of a count herself, she seemed accustomed to giving orders.

Raising the white flag, the head researcher led us deeper into the research institute.

“Kinda reminds me of a school hallway.”

“Yeah.”

There weren’t any windows, but it had a similar atmosphere.

After turning several corners, we passed through a set of heavy double doors into a separate annex.

On the other side of the hall was a quarantined room separated by glass, containing a red-rope monster corpse.

A researcher in a white coat was examining it, wearing a mask and goggles.

“Is there only one?”

“The ones we’ve already investigated were sent away for disposal.”

The head researcher brushed off Athena’s question irritably.

Maybe he had some kind of grudge against the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves.

“Already?”

“Please take a closer look, Your Highness. That monster corpse has already begun to rot. Once they have been dissected, it is best to dispose of the corpses at once.”

The head researcher forced a smile.

“But it hasn’t even been two days...”

Not only were the flesh and hide already going soft, the bones were so brittle that they fell apart at the researcher’s touch.

“We are still investigating, but it appears that the red-rope monsters decompose and decay unusually quickly after death. This is a common symptom of monsters that have been forced to grow at high speeds by Dark Magic.”

A decidedly confident elite researcher appeared.

I had never heard of Dark Magic that could speed the growth of monsters. *I’ll have to ask about that later.*

“And who are you?”

“Pardon my intrusion. I am the executive chief engineer. My name is—”

“Don’t butt in when I didn’t ask for you. I will explain things to Her Highness. You just finish the paperwork to submit to His Excellency the Prime Minister!”

“Ah, I have that right here. All that’s left is for you to sign it, sir.”

The head researcher scowled at the engineer's unpleasant smile.

On Princess Sistina's order, one of the ladies-in-waiting took the documents from the chief engineer and handed them to her.

Arisa and Mia wanted to see, too, so I held both of them up as we read over the princess's shoulder. Rather than crane my neck at the same time, I used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to read it instead.

"So you were able to surmise the purpose of the magic items. Do you have one on hand?"

"Yes, on that desk there. You're free to look, but don't touch it—can't have you breaking it on us."

The princess looked up sharply and sent a chilling glare at the engineer.

"You there! Do not be impolite to Lord Satou, a master of magic development. As a researcher, you ought to show him more respect."

"M-master? This little—I mean, this young man?"

"Are you implying that you do not believe my words?"

As the princess's glare intensified, the chief researcher hurriedly bowed his head in apology.

"This? It says it's a magical ignition tool..."

"Yes, that's right. They were all more than half-broken, but it's simple enough to guess. The Practical Magic spell Signal works as an activation key and activates the magic circle or delay rune it's connected to."

"You're supposed to be a magic master, and you don't even know that? ... Erm, well, I suppose that makes sense. They went out of fashion hundreds of years ago."

Noticing the princess's annoyed stare, the chief engineer quickly changed his tune.

"Have you ever held off on the final line of a chant to change the timing when you invoke a spell? To put it simply, we call magic runes with that kind of functionality 'delay runes.'"

He explained that they were once widely used in battle or for safely hunting monsters.

They went out of mainstream usage because skilled mages or sharp-eyed monsters figured out how to avoid them, techniques were developed to wipe out any delay runes in the area, and so on.

There were still a fair amount of people using them to this day, and when I searched my spellbooks on hand, I found several sections of chants specifically for delay runes.

While we were at it, I had him tell me more about the use of Dark Magic to speed the growth of monsters. He told me that it wasn't the intended use of the spell but a side effect that had been discovered by chance in experiments at the royal research institute.

I found the same spell in one of my spellbooks and made a note to test it at some point.

"But it doesn't explode if you use Signal as an activation key?"

"It's not just a simple signal that sets it off. It's a special wavelength repeated over and over."

The chief engineer answered Arisa's question politely. Either he didn't mind kids, or he just liked explaining things.

"Where are the magic circles that were found alongside the magic tools?" the princess asked the head researcher.

"We have these three replicas drawn by the staff."

"Three? But there were five different incidents, were there not?"

"We did not find any magic circles at the remaining two sites."

"Does that mean they were destroyed or erased?"

"It is difficult to say. There were traces of violent monsters at all five sites."

The head researcher glared at the engineer for interrupting.

"Besides, we do not know if these magic circles were actually related. There is writing of some sort in the circles, but..." The chief engineer shook his head.

“They might just be nonsense.”

“Fragment?”

“Hey, what’s this burnt fragment over here?”

Mia pointed at something on the corner of the desk, and Arisa translated her short question.

“It’s a fragment that was found near the magic tool.”

“It might not be related to the incident, but we took it just in case because of the unfamiliar pattern.”

The engineer supplemented the head researcher’s words.

“Hey, this pattern...”

“Mm, Dejima.”

It did indeed look like the patterns on the Dejima Island pottery we saw in the weaselfolk merchant’s storehouse.

“You’re pretty knowledgeable for such young kids,” the chief engineer said to Arisa and Mia.

It was indeed an item from the Weaselfolk Empire, and they confirmed that guards had already been sent out to investigate.

“This is where they dispose of demonic potions, too, correct?”

The princess asked the head researcher this and requested to speak with the researchers who did the disposal.

She was referring to the demonic potions that were found in the military storehouse in the incident that almost brought down Marquis Kelten.

“Th-the demonic potions were detoxified with a neutralizer and flushed into the sewers.”

“The sewers...”

After sinking into thought for a moment, Princess Sistina told the researchers that she wanted to see where they were flushed.

The head of the institute tried to protest that it was much too unclean, but

the princess insisted that he take us there.

“Right this way.”

The disposal site, which was in an isolated area, was so foul-smelling that I understood why the head researcher was so reluctant to take us there.

Everyone, including him, the princess, and my own companions, screwed up their faces and covered their mouths with handkerchiefs.

For some reason, there were chains hanging from the ceiling and piles of sacks against the wall.

There was a fence farther inside; according to my map, there was a shaft leading into the sewers on the other side.

“Rat.”

“Oh dear, its tail is sticking out.”

A group of workers were busy disposing of the wrapped-up giant mutant rat corpse.

There were slimes being kept at the bottom of the shaft, digesting and breaking things up to prevent the sewers from getting clogged.

“H-hey, there’s nobles here.”

“Uh-oh...”

Noticing the princess, the workers dropped the corpse to the ground and bowed deeply.

“Don’t mind me. Carry on.”

The princess seemed unbothered, walking right past them.

...Hmm?

I caught sight of the corpse where it had come unwrapped and noticed something strange.

“Are you examining the flesh and organs somewhere else?”

“No, we are n...”

The researcher trailed off mid-sentence.

Noticing us looking at it, the men hurriedly covered the corpse again.

“What is the meaning of this?” the researcher demanded.

“We snagged some bits what weren’t rotted yet.”

“I told you to dispose of all of it. Where is the rest of the body? Throw it away at once!”

Cowed by the researcher’s anger, the men reluctantly uncovered the hidden pieces of meat and threw them away with the rest of the corpse.

“Tch, stingy bastards. If yer throwin’ it away, what’s wrong with us takin’ some?”

“Cut it out!”

As the larger man grumbled under his breath, the smaller man stopped him.

“We ordered you to dispose of it because it’s poisonous! Do you want to die?!”

A vein was practically popping out of the researcher’s forehead as he chastised the men.

“Is that the ‘neutralizer’ you mentioned?” the princess asked the head researcher, looking uninterested in the bickering behind them.

The head researcher called over one of the others, evidently unsure.

“Yes, just a standard... Hmm, these numbers aren’t right.”

The mid-level researcher trailed off and ran over to the neutralizer shelf, checking the account books.

“Hey! Who took care of this chemical disposal?!”

“Thass me. What about it?”

It was the same man who had grumbled before.

“Did you mix the neutralizer in before disposing of it as we instructed?”

“...S-sure thing, boss. Mixed the neutralizer with them demonic potions real good ’fore we tossed ’em.”

“How did you know it was demonic potions?!”

The man's eyes wavered.

Cornered by the researcher's questions, he broke into a run.

"■..."

Athena started a chant to stop the man.

"Satou."

"On it."

I quickly outpaced the grumbling man and apprehended him.

He made an attempt at resisting, but I wasn't about to lose to someone who didn't know the first thing about fighting.

Noticing Athena stopping her chant with a dour expression, I ducked my head in apology.

"Nice."

"Wonderfully done."

As Mia and the princess praised me, I tied up the man and handed him over to the researchers.

Evidently resigned, the man confessed that he had diverted the demonic potions for the black market.

He placed them in protective bags made of materials that the slimes wouldn't go near before sending them down the sewer, with intent to recover them at the water filtration plant.

He had flushed some neutralizer to make it look like he disposed of it properly, but apparently he got bored of that and stopped at only around 20 percent of the required amount.

"What happened to the demonic potions you took?!"

"Didn't sell much. Most of the bags broke and the product got absorbed by the damn water."

The man smirked shamelessly and spat on the ground.

"How unsightly, head researcher."

“I can’t believe you’d leave other people in charge of disposing of such a dangerous drug!”

The princess and Athena scolded the researchers.

“My deepest apologies, Your Highness. A portion of the demonic potions has been leaked because of my subordinates’ mismanagement.”

The head researcher apologized, and both of them bowed their heads.

“Could this have been the cause of the red-rope monsters?”

“I cannot rule out the possibility.”

The mid-level researcher grimaced.

“What do you think?” Arisa asked me.

I shook my head.

The red-rope monsters, especially the ones that appeared after our encounter, showed up without any prior signs on the map. If they had gradually turned into monsters because of the demonic potion, my map would’ve detected it.

Just in case, I did a map search, but there weren’t any monsters with a Demonic Potion status effect. I didn’t see any bags containing demonic potions, either.

“I shall consult with His Majesty about this incident tomorrow. I expect an appropriate retribution, rather than blaming things on those who work for you.”

The princess looked down coldly at the head researcher.

She must have deliberately said “tomorrow” to give him time to get his affairs in order.

“Let us go, Lord Satou.”

I followed the princess out of the disposal area.

“Are we going to the purification plant next?”

“Just so, Athena,” the princess responded. “There have been mysterious

corpses found there, and it is the site of the second red-rope attack, too.”

“Master, over there.”

When we left the research institute, a suspiciously dressed man was peering at our carriage.

“Before, too.”

Mia confirmed that he was also there when we arrived.

“A beggar, I imagine,” the harsh lady-in-waiting commented.

She was right: He belonged to the beggars’ guild.

Maybe he was even gathering information about the red-rope incident at the Echigoya Company’s request.



“What a filthy place.”

“Smelly.”

Athena wrinkled her nose, and Mia covered hers with a handkerchief.

The stench-ridden water purification plant was in the heart of slums, which seemed like a different city entirely.

Junk and rubbish were strewn all over the streets, as well as people in dirty clothes, who looked up at our carriage with darkened eyes.

“Hey, isn’t that Lawrence?”

There was another carriage stopped on a corner of the slums, and standing nearby was Cardinal Hozzunas of the Parion Province.

“What is he doing, I wonder?”

“Ah yes, the cardinal. His Grace often does charity work of this sort.”

According to the gentle lady-in-waiting, in between his official duties, the cardinal frequently went around to heal the people of the slums who couldn’t afford to pay for a doctor or donate to a temple.

“How do you know all that?”

“His Grace has a lot of fans among us ladies-in-waiting,” she explained.

“He sounds a bit like you, master.”

“Mm, agreed.”

“Really?”

Despite what Arisa and Mia said, I felt like it wasn't quite right to put my hobbies on the same level as a devout priest acting on his noble faith.

“Who goes there?!”

We stopped chatting when we heard one of our guards shouting.

There was the *click-clack* of the other knights putting their hands on their hilts.

“Imperial knights? I am Heim of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.”

I peeked out the window and saw Sir Heim lowering the hood of his overcoat and showing his sword-ring badge as he approached.

The imperial knights must have taken him for a suspicious figure because of the broadsword on his back and the overcoat hiding his Holy Knight's uniform.

“Hey, if it isn't Sir Pendragon. How'd you get stuck guarding royalty all the way out here?”

“Sir Heim, is that not perhaps a touch rude?”

The harsher lady-in-waiting brushed me aside and stuck her head out the window.

“Sorry about that. If Princess Sistina is with you, are you investigating the sakura or the red-rope incidents, perhaps?”

I nodded, and Sir Heim quietly explained how to gather information in this part of town.

Most beggars would answer any question they had information about if you gave them a large copper coin or a silver coin. If they didn't know anything, they would often point you in the direction of someone else who might. It sounded like they were more information dealers than beggars.

“Usually, all you can ask is what they’ve seen and heard for themselves, but some of them will have information the guards don’t know. Use it wisely.”

There were lots of beggars around the water purification plant, making it the perfect spot for gathering information.

Before he left, Sir Heim added, “Be careful, though—this area is dangerous. If you’ve got no more business here, best to leave quickly.”

“We should keep moving, too.”

After we parted ways with Sir Heim, we passed through an iron lattice gate into the water purification plant.

There were several different water tanks, with any garbage that came in through the sewers accumulating in a separate area.

“I don’t know how it could be possible, but it somehow smells even worse in here than outside.”

“Stinky.”

Arisa grimaced, and Mia formed an X in front of her face with her fingers.

As an employee gave us the tour, a few of our number like Mia and Princess Sistina began to feel ill from the smell, so the gentle lady-in-waiting used the Wind Magic spell Air Cleaner a few times.

“Whoa, that’s a lot of trash—wait, and people?”

Just as Arisa said, several residents of the slum had infiltrated the trash area and were dumpster diving.

The Echigoya Company had created more jobs, but evidently there still weren’t enough to go around.

Maybe I should make a whole mining town or something where lots of people can make a decent living?

Checking the map within a few days’ walk of the royal capital, I found a flat area perfect for starting a new village and mountains where veins of iron and precious metals could be found deep within. I would have to talk to Manager Eluterina about this.

“That purification tank is where the corpse was found.”

The employee pointed at an enormous tank around fifty yards in diameter.

The surface of the water was about five yards away, and it was far too sludgy to tell how deep it was. Over half of it was covered with trash and leaves, with several slimes bobbing on top.

Numerous earthen pipes stuck out along the tank, water dripping out slowly.

“Geh!”

Arisa tried to peer inside, only to pinch her nose and groan.

She must have left the range of the gentle lady-in-waiting’s Air Cleaner spell.

“Please be sure to hold your breath if you wish to peer into the tank. It’s dangerous.”

The employee warned that in addition to the smell, it could even emit harmful gases on rare occasions.

“This is where the monster appeared, too.”

“What is this tank connected to?”

“The entire royal capital.”

The employee answered the princess’s question by way of a lady-in-waiting.

...*Hmm?*

“Is that a corpse over there?”

There was a dead body floating with the garbage.

It looked like a crocodile at first, but it was actually a dead lizardfolk person.

“Ah, you’re right. I’ll call the person in charge right away.”

The employee nodded without any particular surprise and asked a nearby worker to report to the office.

This would be a huge incident in Japan. Apparently not so in the Shiga Kingdom, where lives were not valued as highly.

Once the corpse was fished out of the tank, one of the guards who came after

receiving the report was able to identify the body.

“I recognize this face. He’s an unlicensed second-class magic tool craftsman who lived in the slums.”

Hmm, that profession sounds familiar.

Could this lizardfolk person have been silenced in relation to the red-rope incidents, too?

“The body has wounds from a blade—most likely a short weapon like a hunting knife.”

“Nothing of value on him. Maybe he’s connected to that ratfolk bastard the castle folks were keeping an eye on?”

The guards conversed as they inspected the body.

“Who knows? The fact that they’re both unlicensed magic tool craftsmen ain’t enough to say for sure.”

The veteran guard’s words jabbed me in the heart.

Sorry, I was thinking the same thing as the younger guard.

After the guards carried the corpse away, we left the purification plant as well.

We did a quick loop around the rest of the plant first but didn’t find anything new.

“Lord Satou, shall we try the ‘information-gathering’ method Sir Heim spoke of?”

Seeing a beggar in front of the purification plant gate, the princess looked to me. Her curiosity hadn’t been satisfied yet, it seemed.

“Allow me, then.”

I stood up, and Arisa rose to follow me out of the carriage.

“Just a moment, please, Lord Satou. I wish to do it!”

The princess stopped me. Distressingly, she appeared to want to do the questioning herself.

The knights and her ladies-in-waiting put up an admirable fight, but in the end, she managed to win out on the condition that one of the ladies-in-waiting and I would go with her as guards.

“Noble one, would you give this feeble old man your blessin’?”

When the princess walked over, the beggar spoke without looking up.

“I give him a silver coin, correct?”

At the lady-in-waiting’s prompting, the princess tossed a silver coin into the bowl sitting in front of the beggar.

“Thank you very much, noble one.”

The man looked up and swiftly tucked the coin away on his person.

“And now I ask a question, correct?”

This time, she turned to me uncertainly, and I nodded.

“Could you tell me if you know anything about the corpse that was just found?”

“Ah, the unlicensed magic tool craftsman, Getoka. He slept in a tumbledown shack on ol’ Crumbling Roof Road and spent most of his time guzzlin’ cheap drink from that bar over there and passin’ out in a pile of trash. Stingy bastard, he was.”

Ooh, that’s more information than the guards gave us.

I investigated the dead craftsman’s home in my map information and used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to peek into his room.

To my surprise, the guards had already begun searching the place, and they found a magic tool of some kind in the corner of the cluttered room. Though it was a different shape, it had similar circuit construction to the broken magic tool found in relation to the red-rope incident.

“Do you have any idea who might have killed him?”

The beggar ignored the princess’s question, looking off to the side and scratching his head.

I guess that was all we were getting for the first silver coin.

The princess placed another coin in the beggar's bowl, and he answered without looking back at us.

"Probably someone trying to silence him, or rob him? Just last night he was braggin' about makin' bank on some big job, treatin' everyone to drinks, and payin' lizard ladies to wait on him."

"Do you know who the client was for that job?"

The princess added another coin to the bowl as she spoke.

"I didn't see for m'self, but all I knows is it was some beastfolk with light brown fur."

"Do you have any other information?"

She dropped in another coin.

"Not about that beastfolk, no."

"Anything else that seemed important?"

"Was a while ago, but some fella with a funny accent was buyin' up all the discarded slaves in the slums. One o' them slaves turned up dead in that there purification plant, lookin' like someone chewed him up and spit him out."

The beggar added that this happened the morning after the monster incidents.

"Report all of that information to the guards."

The lady-in-waiting traded places with the other and ran off to do so.

"Say, I know where they took 'em."

A kid sitting near the old man smiled broadly and held out his hand as he spoke.

I placed a silver coin in his palm, since the princess didn't appear to understand his meaning.



"Right here."

The street urchin pointed at a door into the underground tunnels, hidden

behind some bushes.

This was where the foreigner who'd bought a great deal of discarded slaves had gone.

"Thank you, that was a big help."

I thanked the boy and handed him a big piece of candy as a tip.

He stuffed it into his mouth, jumped up with glee at the sweetness, and left with a grin on his face.

"I'll go get Her Highness. Sir Pendragon, please make sure there's no one suspicious inside."

With that, the knight who'd come with me went back to where the princess and the others were waiting.

They had stayed behind because the place was covered in weeds.

The only person with me now was Arisa, who was riding on my shoulders. Mia had lost to her in rock-paper-scissors and stayed with the princess.

"Any idea what information they've found at the Echigoya Company?"

"Yeah, they learned everything the beggar just told us and then some."

I'd called the Echigoya Company with Telephone while we were on the way here in the carriage and got information which I now relayed to Arisa.

There was some information about this underground tunnel and rumors that suspicious figures had been seen going in and out.

"Let's share this with Mia, too."

Arisa connected the Space Magic spell Tactical Talk so all three of us could hear one another.

"Was there anything about those discarded slaves?"

"Nothing new, no. I asked them to do a follow-up investigation."

In particular, I asked them to try to find out the names of the slaves and information about the person who'd bought them.

If I knew their names, I could find out their current location with my map

search. I wanted to try to get that information from the local slave traders, but the princess wanted to prioritize this part of the investigation first, so here we were.

“After we check things out here, will we try to find the family of that victim?”

“I imagine so?”

I told them about the lizardfolk man’s home that I’d found using Clairvoyance.

“Yeah, I guess they would prioritize that first...”

“Since the guards are investigating, maybe we should wait to investigate the family until after we’ve heard their results?”

Because our investigation was really just an afterthought, I saw no problem with following the princess’s instincts. The guards and the prime minister’s subordinates were doing an exhaustive investigation already.

“Looks like they’re almost here.”

Beyond the tall weeds, some guards’ helmets came into view.

*“...■■■ **Soil Road** Tsuchinomichi.”*

Ms. Athena used a spell that pushed the weeds aside to create a path.

The once-uneven ground was leveled out perfectly. That was some impressive magic control.

“Go ahead, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Athena.”

The princess approached with her guards and entourage around her.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Lord Satou. Is this the place?”

“Yes, so it seems.”

I pointed at the door into the tunnels.

There were chains around the sturdy-looking door’s handle, kept in place by a large padlock.

“It appears to be locked, but...”

I pulled lightly on the chains, and they broke with a *snap*.

“...the chains have gotten brittle.”

A sturdy padlock won't make a bit of difference if the chains attached to it aren't strong.

“Brittle?”

One of the imperial knights tugged on the chains and looked puzzled, but I ignored him.

As soon as I opened the door, a foul smell wafted out. It would take a fair amount of determination to walk into that.

“Now then, sally forth!”

“Y-Your Highness! Please wait.”

The princess tried to march right through the door, only to be stopped by her guards.

“Why are you still trying to stop me after we've come all this way?! As the saying goes, 'One cannot hope to gain treasure without entering the dragon's den,' hmm?”

The princess said something that reminded me of the Japanese proverb “One cannot acquire a tiger cub without entering the tiger's den” as she walked inside in spite of the protests of her ladies-in-waiting and knights.

“Ah, I can go no fartherrr...!”

But she ruined the effect somewhat by immediately running back out in tears due to the smell.

That was probably about right. The smell from beyond the door was even worse than that of the water purification plant.

“Even Air Cleaner cannot purify it completely,” the lady-in-waiting who could use Wind Magic remarked, although I'm guessing she deliberately weakened her spell to keep the princess from running into potential danger.

“Your Highness, please wait here with the others. I will investigate alone.”

“It's dangerous to go alone, master. Take me and Mia.”

“I’ll be fine. I need you two to stay here and help the princess evacuate in case of an emergency.”

I used our still-connected Tactical Talk spell to talk the pair down.

Mia and Arisa nodded discreetly, still looking reluctant.

“I—I wish to come as well! Otherwise I shall never know why the sakura are not blooming!”

At Ms. Athena’s insistence, she and the gentle lady-in-waiting joined me on the investigation.

The latter was purportedly with us to use the Air Cleaner spell; I assumed it was also because she had the “Tracker” skill, which could be convenient for snooping.

One knight who clearly had a thing for the gentle lady-in-waiting wanted to come along, too, but was rejected on the basis that the sound of armor might scare a perpetrator away.

“But if something unexpected happens, the three of you will be in danger without help,” the imperial knight persisted.

“Your Highness, might I borrow your summoned beast so we can alert you in case of an emergency?” Athena asked before we set out on our venture.

“Oh yes! What a splendid idea! I shall happily lend my summoned beast to you, Athena.”

The princess clapped her hands in delight: If we brought the creature, she could see and hear through it and feel like a part of the search.

The princess summoned her squirrowl, a creature that could see in the dark, and handed it to Ms. Athena.

“Well then, we’ll be back soon!”

With Athena enthusiastically taking the lead, the three of us (and one squirrowl) set off into the underground tunnels.

“■ *Mana Light Matou.*”

The gentle lady-in-waiting used a Practical Magic spell to light the way.

She cast it at the bottom of a folded paper tube, creating a flashlight-like beam.

“This will make it more difficult for robbers to spot us,” she said with an adorably triumphant look.

As we proceeded down the tunnel, the smell grew stronger, and I heard the distant sound of running water.

Eventually, the tunnel connected to the sewers. The sewage tunnel was about six feet across, with a narrow passage on either side just wide enough for one person to traverse.

“Look at this. There are footprints here—three different kinds. They all continue in this direction.”

There were footprints in the accumulated muck.

Just as the lady-in-waiting proudly pointed out, the footsteps continued through the passage in the upstream direction.

Remembering that I also had the “Tracking” skill, I used it as I looked more closely at the footprints and noticed one more faint set going in the same direction.

“Are these footprints as well?”

“Those are most likely older. No need to pay them any mind.”

The lady-in-waiting promptly shut me down.

We followed her lead into the sewage tunnel.

“This is quite a large space.”

Following the passage, we soon came upon what looked like a large reservoir. Maybe it was an anti-flooding basin of some kind?

The reservoir had a rounded atrium-like wall, with several large holes through which water trickled in.

“Over there! I see a hand!”

Ms. Athena spotted a dead body floating in the water.

...Hmm?

A single white dot was approaching on my radar—from one of the holes, judging by its position. I looked in that direction and caught a glimpse of a figure whose face was covered with a tattered cloth: an orc, according to my AR display.

Maybe they were secretly living in the sewers, like the orc Ga Hou I'd met under the royal capital?

"Sir Pendragon, over there!"

The lady-in-waiting happened to spot the same figure.

The orc started running away in a panic.

"After them!"

I automatically started running at her command, against my better judgment.

As I ran after the orc, taking care not to catch up, I used my map to search for orcs underground. Unlike the old capital, where there was only Ga Hou and one other orc, there were almost thirty of them under the royal capital.

Since Ms. Athena and the lady-in-waiting appeared to have stayed behind, I transformed into Nanashi as I ran.

I lost sight of the orc while I was doing all this, but it was easy enough to find the hidden door he'd run into using my radar and following his footprints.

Disarming the lock and traps, I opened the hidden door.

When I proceeded down the corridor into a wider hall, a grate slammed shut behind me, and I was surrounded by orcs.

While most of the adults were over level 30, the younger ones were all below level 10.

The women hid in the homes, dragging their curious children away from the windows.

""""<Death to intruders!>""""

The orcs stomped their feet in unison, wielding spears and swords.

One particularly large orc stepped forward from the group.

“<I do not know on whose orders you tracked us down, but you will die here,>” the imperious orc declared. “<My name is Li Fu, of the Great Hog clan. His Golden Majesty granted me the Magic Sword Geiersberg and made me one of the beast lord generals! Draw your sword and fight me, and I will give you a warrior’s death.>”

The orc Li Fu drew a Magic Sword whose name sounded like a certain intergalactic fortress.

He appeared to be the leader of this hidden village. Come to think of it, I thought I remembered Ga Hou muttering his name back in the old capital.

“<Wait a minute, I don’t want to fight. I’m Nanashi, a friend of Ga Hou, the alchemist in the old capital.>”

I raised my hands to prove that I was unarmed.

“<You think saying the name of my friend will dull my blade?!>”

Apparently, Ga Hou didn’t contact Li Fu all that often.

Maybe the teleport gate under the old capital wasn’t connected to this place?

“<It’s true! Lu Heu cooked me an alligator dish, and we drank Evil Spirit Killer wine together and everything.>”

“<You seem to have done your research on us, but—>”

“<Wait a minute, Li Fu. Haven’t you noticed yet? He is speaking our language.>” An old orc woman emerged and stopped Li Fu for me. “<And if Ga Hou was even willing to break out his secret stash of Evil Spirit Killer for him, surely he cannot be a bad person.>”

“<If you insist, matriarch, I will put away my blade for now.>”

Li Fu sheathed his Magic Sword and led me to a table in one corner of the plaza.

“<Who’s that person? Did he bring us food?>”

Children came out of their homes to look at me curiously.

“<You think so? I’m starved.>”

“<’Mhungry, too.>”

“<I wanna eat daikon.>”

As their mother tried to usher them back inside, the children complained of hunger.

“<Are you low on food stores?>”

“<’Fraid we haven’t been able to come in and out much due to some suspicious types lurking about.>”

“<Well, I have extras in my Item Box that I could spare.>”

“<We’d appreciate it.>”

I had tons of vegetables from the farmer we contracted in Labyrinth City and enough meat and fish to feed entire cities.

“<I’ll throw in some extra daikon, too.>”

My daikon stores weren’t as plentiful, but I’d heard a child saying she wanted some, and Lu Heu in the old capital said they were most orcs’ favorite food.

“<Oooh! It’s daikon!>”

Li Fu held up a daikon radish from the mountain of vegetables.

“““<Daikooooon!!>”””

“““<We’ve got daikon!>”””

The other orcs all gathered around immediately, looking immensely excited.

I guess maybe they like it more than I realized—almost as much as we Japanese people like rice, even.

“<Why d’you have daikon?>”

“<I always keep some on hand for making *oden*.>”

“<You have *oden*?!>”

The orc who approached me seemed thrilled at the prospect of *oden*, too; I produced some from my stock of pre-cooked *oden*. It was great with some heated Shigan sake when I got a snack craving in the middle of the night.

“<It’s still hot?>”

“<Looks great.>”

I gave two full pots of *oden* to one of the orc wives to hand out to everyone.

It’s a nice feeling to see people delightedly eating food you made and exclaiming about how good it is, even if it might’ve just been because they were so hungry.

In a good mood, I also gave my *oden* recipe to the same orc lady, as well as some kelp and other seasoning for making the broth.

“Master, how’s it going in there? Athenacchi said you ran off after a suspicious figure and haven’t come back.”

Arisa contacted me through Tactical Talk. Evidently, the princess had gotten word from Athena through the summoned beast.

“Sorry. I ran into someone I knew and got caught up talking to them. Don’t worry about me, just tell the princess to wait a little longer. I’ll come back as fast as I can.”

“Someone you knew, in the underground tunnels? Well, if you say so. I’ll contact you again if it looks like time’s almost up.”

“Thanks.”

Since Athena and the lady-in-waiting must have been worried, I decided to take care of business quickly and head back.

I looked for Li Fu and headed over to him.

“<Thank you, Nanashi. Now our kids don’t have to starve.>”

“<Glad to hear it.>” I nodded lightly and moved on to the matter at hand.
“<There is one thing I wanted to ask you, though.>”

“<What is it?>”

“<You said something about some suspicious people earlier. Could you tell me a bit more about that?>”

“<Of course. For a while now, some strange humans have been lurking around and doing strange rituals from time to time, but in the past few days,

we've had sightings of a much more dangerous group.>"

The former were just oddballs who drew meaningless glyphs in slate pencil, while the latter included a beastfolk leading discarded slaves and a mage with men who'd dropped out of the army.

I showed him the magic circles that had been found near the sites of the red-rope incidents, and Li Fu nodded. "<Yes, just like that.>"

So the mysterious magic circles with unknown meaning were actually drawn by a different group than the one behind the red-rope monster attacks.

"<Dangerous in what way?>"

"<They horribly torture the slaves and prostitutes they bring in, then chop them to pieces. Had the matriarch not ordered us to refrain from involvement with those from the outside world, I would have long since felled them with my own blade.>" Li Fu sounded bitter. "<If you wish to know more, shall I show you the way? I doubt they are there any longer, but if their victims' bodies yet remain...>"

He seemed to want me to bring the bodies back for a proper burial.

I followed Li Fu to the group's hideout, or at least, the place where they did their torture.

It was a large room that smelled of rot, full of bodies in terrible shape.

I'm not good with gore at all, so I did my best not to look at them directly as I investigated the area.

The center of the floor was indented in a bowl-like shape, full of liquid that bubbled with foam.

Chains hung from the ceiling, and there were torture devices and a suspicious-looking magic circle around the basin.

"<This is...>"

It wasn't just some made-up "curse" like the others; it looked like the demon-related ones I'd seen in the plunderers' hideout in the labyrinth's Upper Stratum.

"<How foul. This magic circle is drawn in blood.>"

Just as Li Fu murmured this, the magic circle activated with a dark red glow.

"<Get back, Nanashi!>" Li Fu roared, jumping away from the circle himself.

A red dot appeared on my radar near the bottom of the basin.

"New materials, *boing*?"

A thick pink liquid began to rise from the basin, littered with corpses and garbage.

According to my AR, it was a level-41 intermediate demon.

"An orc's a rare material, *boing*. This summoner sure likes to experiment, *boing*. I'll work extra hard on this new Monster Seed pill, *boing*."

"Where'd you come from?"

The demon hadn't shown on my radar before.

"From the gaps, *boing*. We hide in the gaps our lord gives us, *boing*."

It even went to the trouble of opening an Item Box-like black space to demonstrate for me.

I see, so it's an Item Box-like ability that the user can use to hide... That would explain why it didn't show up on my map or radar.

I skimmed over the demon's detailed information. Its race-specific inherent skill "Demon Nest" seemed like the most likely candidate for how it was using these so-called gaps.

I put a marker on the demon just in case it got away.

While I was at it, I used Tactical Talk to update Arisa: "*Found an intermediate demon. About to destroy it.*"

"Are you the one who unleashed monsters into the royal capital?"

With this thing's ability, it would probably be possible to hide monsters in the "gaps" and escape my map search, too.

"What do you mean, *boing*? If you'd ask something that off the mark, you must not work for my lord, *boing*? You must be some stupid materials who

wandered in by mistake, *boing.*”

Off the mark, huh...?

I guess there were other ways to hide monsters, like advanced Space Magic.

“Who summoned you?”

There was no summoner name in this demon’s detailed information. That could only mean that the summoner had a verbal agreement with the demon, not a summoner’s control over it.

I searched my map. The number of people with Summoning Magic in the royal capital was less than twenty, including Princess Sistina.

So one of them must have summoned the demon here... No, I couldn’t say that for sure, since there were also summoning items like the one that was used to attack Lady Helmina of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen back in Labyrinth City.

“As if I’d tell you, *boing.*”

The bemused-sounding demon shot pink feelers toward me.

They split off into smaller tendrils right before they reached me, turning into thorny blades that glittered like metal.

Slash.

Li Fu used the Magic Sword Geiersberg to cut down all the sharpened feelers at once.

“<Fragile thing. Are you done gathering information?>”

The crimson ore blade glowed red with Li Fu’s magic.

“<Yeah, I don’t think it’s gonna tell me anything else.>”

“<I see. Then you do not mind if I cut it down?>”

“<Fine by me, but I thought you weren’t supposed to get involved with outsiders?>”

“<Such rules need not apply to demons.>”

PWYOYOOPWYOYOO.

The demon parried the attack and raised more slime from the floor, taking a

form I can only describe as an unstable octopus.

“<Orc sword style, third form—‘Iron Slicer’!>”

Li Fu’s sword sliced up the demon—but its amorphous form immediately merged back together.

“It’s no use, *boing*. Blades have no effect on me, *boing*.”

As the demon tried to counterattack Li Fu, I kicked it into the wall.

“Pointless, *boing*. Blows do not affect me either, *boing*.”

The demon bounced around as if taunting us.

However, its health bar had gone down from both attacks. It must have some resistance to them, but saying they had “no effect” was a bluff.

“<■■■■■ **Enchant Flame Matoenba**.>”

Li Fu created flames that coiled around the strongly heat-resistant crimson ore blade like a snake. I guess he was planning on fighting slime with fire.

PWYOYOO.

The *boing* demon’s surface rippled, and countless spikes shot toward Li Fu.

“<Such moves could never defeat a knight of His Golden Majesty!>”

Li Fu used impressive swordsmanship and body movements to narrowly parry and avoid all the attacks.

“<Orc sword style, sixth form—‘Flame Buster’!>”

Li Fu used his flame-twined Magic Sword to slice through and burn the *boing* demon as it attempted to close in on him.

BZZOO.

The demon howled in pain.

“N-not bad, *boing*. But do not underestimate demons, *boing*.”

Blood trickled from Li Fu’s side.

“<Nnngh, so you cut me just as I sliced through you...>” Li Fu trailed off, coughing up blood and clutching his side. “<Poison... Typical demon

cowardice.>”

“That is just how demons are, *boing*. Keep showing me your delicious contempt and rage, *boing*.” The demon returned to its intact form. “Where did the other one go, *boing*?”

“Right here.”

I used “Warp” to sneak up to the demon’s side in a flash and cut it in two with Claidheamh Soluis.

“B-blades have no effect, *bo—*”

Next, I used the Freeze Water spell on the increased surface area where I’d cut it.

BYZZOO.

The demon howled again.

“Th-this isn’t enough to freeze me, *boing...*”

As the demon blustered, I kept activating Freeze Water over and over.

Just to be safe, I mixed in a few Mana Drains to steal its magic while I was at it.

“I—I won’t freeze, *boing*. I swear I won’t freeze, *boing!*”

Most of the demon’s body had frozen over as it repeated itself deliriously.

“<Then I shall have to break you!>”

Li Fu’s Magic Sword Geiersberg cut down the frozen demon, breaking it into smithereens.

“<What about the poison?>”

“<Antidotes are a necessity when you live down here.>”

I’d rather not live down here, then, I thought.

As Li Fu clutched his wound, I used magic to heal it.

“<Chant-less magic... And you used a Holy Sword before. You really are a hero, then?>”

"<Yeah, basically.>"

"<Could you cut only my head and spare the rest?>"

I wish he wouldn't talk like heroes automatically exterminate orcs.

"<I'm not cutting anyone's head off. I told you I was friends with Ga Hou, remember? Demons and monsters are more than enough enemies for me.>"

Taking care to keep up Nanashi's signature casual tone, I cleared up Li Fu's misunderstanding as I used my Holy Sword to clean up the frozen pink chunks of still-living demon that hadn't turned into black fog and vanished.

"<Okay, that should do it. Thanks for the help, Li Fu. Let me make it up to you.>"

"<Not at all. The food you gave us was more than enough.>"

I waved to Li Fu as he returned to his hidden village and told Arisa I'd defeated the demon.

"Perfect timing. The princess called for a search party that just showed up, so I guess I'll let them go in. If these demons can hide in space, then I ought to go with them, I'd say."

"No need to force yourself. It's pretty awful in here."

"Ah-ha-ha, I might have the body of a child, but I'm an adult on the inside, remember? I've been trained on horror movies and slashers. Not to mention, I saw those torture victims' bodies in the plunderers' and pirates' hideouts."

I gave in to Arisa's insistence, since I needed her Space Magic to help with the investigation.

"Ah..."

"What's up?" I asked.

"An imp just showed up here. Looks like it's checking us out from a distance."

"Maybe the summoner sensed that this demon got destroyed and sent it to see what happened?"

"Yeah, that's a good possibility."

I checked on the map, but like the imp we saw during the initial red-rope incident, its title was Familiar, and the section for its owner was blocked out with strange symbols.

I put a marker on it and shrank my map into a corner of my vision.

“Ah, it ran away! The princess sent a summoned tracking bird after it.”

I saw the marker begin to move on my map.

The imp was running around all over the place, probably in an effort to shake off the princess’s tracking bird.

“You can let the princess handle that. I’m keeping an eye on it, too.”

“All right, then.”

I ended the call with Arisa and went back to where I’d left Athena and the lady-in-waiting.

“How far did you chase them?!”

“Honestly! Some people get lost in the sewers and never return, you know!”

After the lady-in-waiting and Ms. Athena gave me an earful, I explained that the suspicious figure had been trying to summon a demon and I stopped them. They didn’t believe me at first, but they accepted it once I showed them the darkened core the demon had left behind.

“What’s this...?”

“A body we found while you were chasing that suspect. Ms. Athena pulled it out with a golem.”

I stopped her as she started to cover the body with a cloth.

I recognized that face. It was, without a doubt, the weaselfolk mage I’d seen at the Sahbe Company.

I relayed this information to the rest of my group with Tactical Talk as I told Athena and the lady-in-waiting about it.

“Why would a company mage turn up dead in a place like this...?”

“Could the Sahbe Company be connected to these recent incidents?”

Athena furrowed her brow in thought.

The lady-in-waiting examined the body and declared the cause of death to be strangulation, just as the soldiers who were called to search for me arrived.

A few of them stayed behind to investigate the area further, and I ended up guiding everyone else to inspect the place where the demon had appeared.

“This is quite something...”

A veteran guard wrinkled his nose while a less-jaded guard ended up losing his lunch at the awful sight and was scolded by the veteran.

I was fine, since I was still avoiding looking at the bodies directly.

Ms. Athena and the gentle lady-in-waiting came along, too, though they quickly turned pale and nearly fainted at the gruesome scene.

Even Arisa, who insisted she would be fine, looked pale as well.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I feel better thanks to the medicine you gave me.”

Arisa used Space Magic to investigate the area.

“There are some distortions, but it’s just left over from when the demon was hiding. The rest is all just like me and master’s Item Boxes.”

Arisa looked exhausted afterward. Searching for faint distortions in space must be harder than I realized.

Letting Arisa rest, I helped Athena in her determined efforts to inspect the magic circle.

It went faster than I expected: The guards were done with their search before half the afternoon had passed.

They determined from what was left of their clothes that about half the bodies belonged to the discarded slaves we’d come here to search for.

So we were too late to save them... Arisa and I took a moment of silence for the victims.

Right before we left, I summoned a Shadowdive Bat to hide in the ceiling. This

way, if the culprits came back here, I could follow them. We had to catch the culprits and bring them to justice, to honor these victims and prevent any new ones.

“Satou.”

As I let the fresh air soothe my soul, Mia used Bubble Wash to clean the filth off Arisa and me. I used the Practical Magic spell Deodorant at the same time as her spell.

“Thank you, Mia.”

It was a big relief, since I couldn’t use Practical Magic spells like Deodorant and Soft Wash in front of the guards.

“Monster Seed?” Mia asked.

“We didn’t find any,” Arisa answered.

I’d already updated the pair on what I’d learned during the fight with the demon.

I searched the map for the pills called Monster Seeds, too, but I didn’t see any near where the demon had been. There was only one hit, in an unexpected place.

“Weasel.”

“Yes, most likely.”

Indeed, the only hit was in a room of the Sahbe Company, run by Mr. Homimudory of the Weaselman Empire.

“All that’s left is to see where that imp the princess’s summoned beast is chasing ends up.”

We looked toward the princess, who was still continuing the chase through her summon.

“Ah, it got away again! Is it under a tree this time? Aah! The coward knocked down a street stall’s support to try to shake me! I swear I shan’t let it get away!”

Princess Sistina was still quite energetic in spite of how long the chase had gone on. She kept leaning her body from one side to the other, synching up

with her summoned beast's movements. It was a little cute, like someone who leans back and forth when they play racing games.

"Aaaah, I lost it! Where'd it go? There! There are people and golems. We're in the courtyard of some company—it went into a room in the mansion—ouch!"

The princess clutched her forehead with one hand, then punched the chair she was sitting in with frustration.

"I am sorry, Lord Satou. My summoned beast was defeated. I believe it was a trading company of some kind, but we ran around so much that I know not where."

She looked at me in distress.

It's okay, I know where it is. I was following it on my radar the whole time.

The place where her summoned beast had disappeared was the very same that had come up in my conversation with Arisa about Monster Seeds: the Sahbe Company.

The imp entered the room containing the Monster Seed, then vanished from my map. Since it was gone from my marker list as well, whoever summoned the imp had probably dismissed it.

"You mentioned that you saw golems before. Was there someone riding in the golem's head area, by any chance?"

"Yes, there was."

I asked a few other questions, then confirmed that it was the Sahbe Company.

"The dead mage from the company found near a suspicious ceremony... The fragment from Dejima Island that was discovered on the scene of a red-rope attack. The Sahbe Company deals in curse stones. The person who ordered the magic tool was a beastfolk. And the imp that appeared after Lord Satou defeated that demon ran away to that very place..."

The princess muttered all the information we'd gathered so far.

"...There's no doubt about it! The Sahbe Company is behind the red-rope incidents!"

Princess Sistina looked like she was about to exclaim “Case closed!” or something.

She insisted that we go arrest the culprits at once, and we went with the reinforcements—who were actually the prime minister’s intelligence operatives disguised as guards—to the Sahbe Company.

“Isn’t it a bit soon to go into the cross-examination?” Arisa politely suggested. The princess confidently declared that it would be fine, however, and we reached our destination without anyone else attempting to stop her.

I did think we were a little short on proof, but given the circumstances, I also figured he was probably the culprit.



“She-she-she, if it isn’t Sir Pendragon. And you’ve brought an especially high-class young lady with you today, too.”

“Hello again, Mr. Homimudory. I appreciate you seeing us on such short notice.”

As soon as we arrived, we were quickly able to get a meeting with Mr. Homimudory thanks to the princess’s royalty power. Two of the intelligence operatives came with us, too.

“Her Highness requested that I accompany her here today, since I am an acquaintance of yours.”

I did think he was connected to the red-rope incidents, but I thought it was best to keep up appearances for now just in case. However...

“Lord Satou, there is no need for such formalities.”

The princess was apparently dying to make an accusation. She jumped out of her chair and pointed her folded fan at Mr. Homimudory.

“Our business is regarding the red-rope monster incidents. You are aware of them, I trust?”

“The red-rope monsters? Yes, of course.”

Mr. Homimudory looked like he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Then you confess that you are the mastermind?” the lady-in-waiting challenged, speaking for the princess.

“The mastermind?” Mr. Homimudory tilted his head. “Whatever do you mean?”

“The mastermind who unleashed the red-rope monsters in the royal capital, of course!”

“She-she-she, I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I was impressed with his ability to respond so calmly while surrounded by guards and imperial knights.

“Yeah, the culprit’s got to play dumb at first.”

“Accusation scene. Important.”

Arisa and Mia quietly added commentary that didn’t quite fit the mood.

“Do you have any evidence or testimonies? Or shall I undergo an interrogation with an analyst?”

Oh, right. I forgot this world has “analysts” who can actually tell whether someone is lying.

“Oh, come on. Using a lie detector in the big accusation scene ruins the fun.”

“Mm. Boorish.”

I thought it was a good idea, since it would do away with the possibility of a false accusation.

“Very well. Athena, our perpetrator has requested proof and a ruling.”

Princess Sistina gave Athena a signal.

Ms. Athena nodded and produced a medallion from her pocket, holding it aloft.

I learned later that this medallion was proof that she was an analyst. I hadn’t realized she had the requisite skills.

“Analyst Athena inquires. You hired the weaselfolk second-class magic tool craftsman Zune and the lizardfolk second-class magic tool craftsman Getoka,

either directly or indirectly, to create the magic tools that were used in the red-rope summonings, did you not?”

“No, I did not. I have worked with both of them before, but I only requested ordinary insect-repellant magic tools, and that was half a year ago now. I do not know if they made any magic tools that were used for summonings.”

Requesting magic tool creation: innocent.

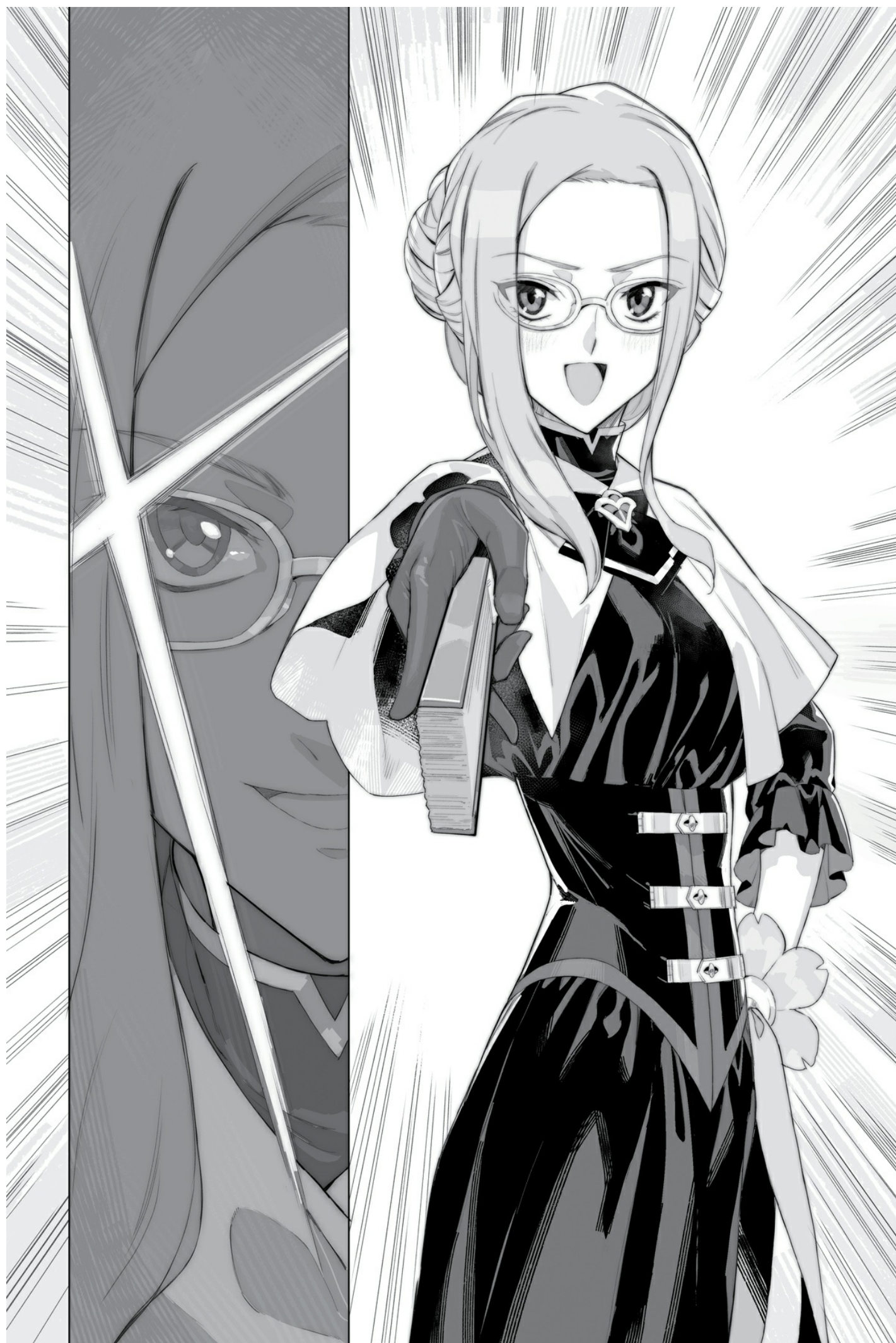
“Analyst Athena inquires. Were you directly or indirectly involved in the killing of the lizardfolk Getoka?”

“No, I was not.”

Killing the magic tool craftsman: innocent.

“Analyst Athena inquires. You sold this curse stone, did you not?”

“I do not know. It does resemble a product that we sell, but it is a third-rate and commonplace item. I cannot confirm or deny that I sold this specific stone.”



Curse stone: unclear.

“Analyst Athena inquires. This fragment is a product you sold, correct?”

“I do not know. It is undoubtedly a Dejima Island artifact, and I have sold similar pots and vessels, but those are quite common from Dejima Island. I cannot say for sure if this one was sold by my company or another merchant.”

Dejima Island fragment: unclear.

“Did you, directly or indirectly, buy or sell discarded slaves at the slave-trading company near the slums—erm, the purification plant?”

“No. We only deal with trusted slave traders.”

Killing the discarded slaves: innocent.

“Did you send your company mage into the sewers?”

“No. I gave no such order.”

That would mean the weaselfolk mage was there for a reason other than orders from his boss.

“Were you connected to the death of your company mage?”

“No—wait, Siporohhoy is dead?!”

Mr. Homimudory looked shocked. I nodded.

“Analyst Athena inquires. Did you perform a demon summoning, directly or indirectly?”

This was the million-dollar question.

“No.”

“Really?” the princess blurted out.

“Yes, really.”

Summoning a demon: innocent.

“Arisa.” Mia prodded her.

“Uh-huh. Athenacchi, c’mere a second.”

Arisa whispered in Ms. Athena’s ear.

“Analyst Athena inquires. Have you ever met an imp?”

“Yes, I have.”

The princess and the others brightened at that.

“When and where? Tell us at once.”

“Two days ago, one appeared in our rear garden. We bumped into each other as I opened the door, and it placed a curse on me.”

Mr. Homimudory answered the princess’s demand, and Athena’s analysis confirmed that it was the truth. He denied conversing with it or exchanging any items.

Use of an imp: innocent.

“Athena, the last question.”

“Of course. Analyst Athena inquires. Do you possess an item called a Monster Seed?”

I had told the princess that I heard about this item when I defeated the demon.

She must have saved this question for last, since the person who summoned the demon was supposedly researching them.

“No.”

Huh...?

I hurriedly searched my map. The Monster Seed was gone.

Did he give it to someone with an Item Box?

“Analyst Athena inquires further. Did you give an item called a Monster Seed to someone else?”

“No.”

Mr. Homimudory’s face looked calm.

What’s going on here?

I looked at Athena.

“Athena?” asked the princess.

“He’s...telling the truth.”

Possession or transfer of a Monster Seed: innocent.

“But it was here, right?”

“Yeah, it was stashed in a box in the president’s office last time I checked.”

Arisa and I conferred in Tactical Talk.

“Does that mean someone brought it in and took it out again without the president knowing?”

“I guess so...”

Just to be safe, I ventured a question myself.

“President, this may seem unrelated, but has anyone taken any packages from your office this past chime?”

“Yes, of course. There were many Coming of Age Day decorations requested by nobles that were being kept in there.”

He explained that he kept them in his personal office because many of them were highly valuable.

I asked him to show me the list. There were over a hundred clients.

It’d be backbreaking work to investigate them all.

At any rate...

“Have you cleared up your suspicions about me?”

The princess had no choice but to nod at Mr. Homimudory’s question. His face was still unreadable.

We parted ways with the intelligence operatives, who seemed to want to arrest Mr. Homimudory on unrelated charges, and investigated a few other places we had planned to visit, but unfortunately we didn’t find any more information or new discoveries.



“We’ve arrived at Sir Pendragon’s abode.”

The carriage stopped, and the coachman called out to us.

“I am sorry I could not be of more use.”

I apologized to the princess. I’ve never been very good at whodunits.

“What...?” She looked at me in surprise. “Whatever are you saying, Lord Satou?! You followed the suspect and found the site of that horrible ritual, and you even found and destroyed a demon that had invaded the royal capital!”

“She’s right! It’s incredible that you defeated a demon on your own!”

“You will surely be rewarded! This is an achievement that could grant a great promotion to a lesser noble!”

“And without a scratch, too...”

The princess, Athena, and the gentle lady-in-waiting all heaped praise on me.

“We may not have found the culprit behind the red-rope incident, but that is to be expected in only a day’s—Athena, look!”

“Aaah!”

The princess and Ms. Athena pointed at the cherry blossom tree in our yard.

“Buds,” Mia observed.

“Yes, it looks like they’ve started budding.”

The dryad did say they would blossom soon.

“I-is it because there’s an elf here?”

“Nope. Satou.”

Athena whirled to stare intensely at Mia, who responded with characteristic brevity.

She was probably referring to the situation with the dryad.

“Lord Satou? However did you cause them to bud?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer the princess’s question.

“Maybe it’s because he destroyed the demon that was nesting underground?” Arisa suggested vaguely.

“The sakura bloomed because a demon was defeated? So the reason they weren’t blooming was the demon...? Now that you mention it, the head Sakura Protector did say something about the flow of the earthen vein being disrupted. So the demon lurking in the sewers was what was affecting the vein!”

Luckily for me, Ms. Athena supplied additional information to connect the dots.

The sakura dryad did say that the disruption in the earthen vein was the reason the tree wasn’t blooming properly. Whether the demon had anything to do with it, I had no idea.

“I’d expect no less of Lord Satou! How magnificent!”

Athena’s explanation seemed to convince the princess, who smiled even more dazzlingly than when she was charging into the Sahbe Company to interrogate the suspect.

Come to think of it, I suppose the reason they were investigating the red-rope incidents in the first place was because they suspected it had something to do with the sakura tree not blooming.

“Perhaps the Royal Sakura—that is, the Holy Sakura Tree is blooming now as well.”

Princess Sistina and Ms. Athena looked at each other.

“Your Highness!”

“Yes, we must investigate at once!”

Athena clambered back into the carriage.

“Lord Satou, I am sorry to take my leave so abruptly, but...”

“Please go ahead. The Holy Sakura Tree is waiting for you, Your Highness.”

“Right!”

The carriage rumbled off toward the royal castle with the princess and company aboard.

It probably wasn’t blooming just yet, but hopefully there would at least be a bud or two.

Silently wishing them luck, I waved to my friends who had come out to greet me and headed back inside.

“By the way, master, it looked like you were doing some investigating on the way back. Did you figure anything out?”

“No. I tried searching for nobles on the list who had the ‘Item Box’ skill or Magic Bags and such, or families or servants with the same, but no one stood out as suspicious. There were about ten in all, so I’ll keep checking over time.”

It was fairly tedious work.

“What about folks with ‘Item Box’ or Magic Bags at the weasel company?”

“Yeah, there were a few of them, too. That brings the total up to fifteen.”

Just thinking about it was tiresome, to be honest.

“Satou, critters.”

Critters...?

“Aha, I get it!”

“Mm.”

I checked the list to see if there were any nonhuman creatures.

Since I was told the packages contained decorations for Coming of Age Day ceremonies, I hadn’t considered the possibility of living creatures. There were two kinds: peacock bugs and glass birds.

“Which do you think is the right one?”

“Both, it looks like.”

Checking with my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance, I saw that the baskets containing each of the creatures were littered with the remains of pills.

It would’ve been easier to find them if they had altered status conditions in their map information, but I guess things weren’t always that easy.

“They’re both addressed to upper nobles. It might be an attempted assassination or terrorism.”

I used Telephone to alert the king to the Monster Seeds and that they might

have been fed to pets to use in an attack, requesting that he have the pets quarantined.

“All that’s left now is...”

“The activation key.”

“That thing the royal researcher guy was talking about.”

A magic tool that sends signals to activate other magic tools...

Assuming that the Practical Magic spell Signal would be used to activate these, and if the person who made them stuck to the basics...

“Found them.”

Searching for devices that used quartz-like oscillators in their circuits for sending Signals, I came up with a bunch of hits.

A large amount of them were stashed in a merchant’s warehouse. Using Telephone and Clairvoyance to look into it, I figured out with the former that it was a company employed by the Merkray family.

A few street performers had some as well, who I also added to a list.

These devices were shaped like instruments, including flutes and drums. The snake charmer we’d seen during the red-rope encounter was on the list, too.

“Your Majesty, I have more information...”

I told the king where the Signal magic tools were located.

“The Merkray family again, eh...?”

Oh, right. The suspects who the guards chased down after the red-rope incident said something about the Merkray family, too.

The king thanked me and promised to investigate the warehouse and street performers in question.

That should take care of the activation keys, then. It was probably possible to reproduce the Signal with magic, but it would be difficult for all but the most-skilled mages.

Just to be safe, Arisa and I went around that night to a few places with thick

miasma where other *boing* demons might have hidden, but we didn't find any traces of them.

It would be too taxing on Arisa's stamina and magic to have her keep searching at random anyway. Maybe that was the last one.

I guess the case is closed for now, then?

Honestly, it's awful that there are terrorists in this world, too.

Interlude

“...WHAT did you say?!”

A wrathful voice echoed in the dark.

“The authorities have seized the magic tools that serve as activation keys?”

“I am deeply ashamed.”

The beastfolk servant pressed his forehead to the floor as he groveled.

“But we used a merchant’s storehouse that had no connection to us or the magic tool craftsmen we silenced! How could they have been found just two days after we experimented with activating the growth-spiced monsters? It is hardly as if the Shiga Kingdom authorities have the all-seeing eyes of gods!”

The man furiously pounded his fist on the table.

“It may be a small comfort, but it seems the officials are suspicious of the Merkrays, a military family with connections to the merchant. Our only choice is to seek an alternative to the magic tools the authorities have confiscated while they are still distracted.”

In lieu of the servant who was cowering at his lord’s wrath, the task force leader presented a concrete suggestion.

“You make it sound so simple,” snapped the servant. “The ceremony is tomorrow! How can we possibly produce dozens of magic tools in such a short time?!”

“Then are we to simply let the ceremony pass us by?! Do not underestimate our resolve, after we even got ourselves excommunicated to tread upon this land!”

“Resolve alone cannot carry a plan to completion! It takes hard work!”

“Hmph, and is carrying out experiments on the site of those buffoons’ graffiti

your idea of hard work?”

By “those buffoons’ graffiti,” he was referring to the made-up runes drawn with curse stones by the casual occult-loving group Wind of Freedom.

“Or perhaps you refer to pointlessly fashioning the magic activation keys after instruments and having slaves use them in the guise of street performers?”

“The gall! You battle-obsessed warmonger!”

“But of course, battle is my aim. I shall see it achieved, even if I must fall into heresy to do so.”

“Heresy, eh...?”

The man interrupted his subordinates’ argument to voice his new idea.

“Is such a thing possible...?”

“Yes, that method could theoretically set off an uprising of our growth-spawned monsters. It will be on a smaller scale than the original plan, but...”

“Fine. Better that than to call it off entirely.”

With that, the lord sent his beastfolk servant out to gather the items necessary for the new plan.

“Someone was sniffing around in the tunnels, but I took care of it.”

The task force leader whispered in the lord’s ear.

“I heard about that. He was a spy for the Weaselfolk Empire faction that supports the emperor’s brother.”

They were referring to Siporohhoy, the Sahbe Company mage who Satou and the others found dead in the tunnels.

“Were they after the Monster Seeds, too?”

“They are a useful tool for inciting chaos.”

The man nodded.

“Well, it matters not. By the time the information reaches their faction, the Shiga Kingdom will be gone. What’s more,” he continued, “the demon we had making the Monster Seeds has been destroyed.”

“By a hero, was it?”

“I do not know... But I doubt there are many aside from heroes or members of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen who could defeat an intermediate demon so easily.”

“But they haven’t caught wind of us yet?”

“I believe it is safe to assume so, judging by how our other bases were crushed.”

When their bases within the Shiga Kingdom were recently destroyed, it was all within the same day, even though they were in multiple cities.

“It was wise to have the founder excommunicate us, then.”

“I appreciate your hard work.”

“We are hardly worthy of such praise.”

They believed that their bases had been found because of an analyst whose powers outmatched that of their recognition-inhibiting magic tools.

As a result, they had the task force leader and several others excommunicated in advance and sent them to infiltrate the Shiga Kingdom once they were no longer considered members of the Light of Freedom.

“Tomorrow, it finally begins. Be sure not to let the kingdom dogs catch wind of you.”

“Of course.”

The task force leader bowed at the man’s words.

“All is to guide the unenlightened with the Light of Freedom.”

The man’s words echoed in the dark.

Evil-Cleansing Ceremony

All is for the sake of freeing our god sealed within the moon. We shall raze the earth our god so loved and send its people to hell. No doubt such grave sins will be punished with utter destruction, body and soul. But even then, my resolve will not waver. I will see our great god freed from the fetters of the foolish false idols.

“It’s more crowded than I expected.”

On the morning of New Year’s Eve, Satou was at the site prepared for the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony in the royal capital, under the pretext of being Baron Muno’s guardian knight. Despite this claim, he wore no armor nor even a sword. Dressed in formal noble clothing, he looked more like a high-ranking civil official than a bodyguard.

“Sure is.”

“How are you two always this carefree?”

Viscount Nina sighed at Baron Muno and Satou, who seemed perfectly relaxed despite the fact that they’d been separated from their guide.

“Not to worry. We know where the lords’ seats are.”

However, many areas had been marked off-limits for the ceremony, forcing them to take one detour after another.

“Lord Satou!”

Satou turned around at the sound of his name and saw Princess Sistina waving at him with a smile.

Athena the Sakura Protector, who usually accompanied the princess, was currently accompanying the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves.

“Lord Satou, you won’t believe it. The Holy Sakura Tree has produced buds.”

“Congratulations. I’m glad to hear it.”

“Hee-hee, it’s all thanks to your help, Lord Satou.”

The princess’s uncharacteristically sweet demeanor caught onlookers by surprise, and they began whispering gossip among themselves.

Without missing a beat, Satou introduced the princess to Viscount Nina and loudly explained that he’d been helping the princess with an investigation, to clear up any misunderstandings.

“Lord Satou, over there!” The princess’s blissful expression suddenly tensed up. “That weaselman is here.”

“Ah, Mr. Homimudory of the Sahbe Company.”

Satou calmly identified the person the princess was pointing at.

It seemed strange to the two of them that someone who had seemed so suspicious in relation to the red-rope monster incidents would be present at the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony.

“Your Highness, it seems he is here as a subcontractor of the Ghookuts Company, who were hired to furnish the ceremony.”

The princess’s lady-in-waiting relayed information she said she’d gotten from one of the workers.

“No need to worry. I will keep an eye on Mr. Homimudory, and members of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen are here to protect important persons as well. Even if red-rope monsters did show up, they’d be taken care of in no time.”

Satou reassured the concerned-looking princess.

He was right: Three members of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves, and many Holy Knights and high-ranking priests from each temple were all here and ready for combat. They should be more than capable of handling almost any opponent that might appear without Satou himself needing to interfere. *I could always lend a hand if need be*, Satou thought.

Two of the Shiga Eight who were not present, Heim the Weedy and Ryuona the Grasscutter, were patrolling the royal capital’s lower area and the nobles’ district.

“I suppose we’ll be fine as long as you’re here, Lord Satou.”

“I shall do my best to live up to your faith in me, Your Highness.”

Satou smiled politely at the princess, who seemed to have cheered up.

“Your Highness, we should proceed to the royal seats.”

The lady-in-waiting prompted the princess, noticing that people were beginning to make their way to their seats.

“Baron Muno, pardon my intrusion. Until later, Lord Satou.”

The baron bowed to the apologetic princess, and he and Satou headed for the seats set aside for the territory lords.



Meanwhile, as Satou was waiting in the lords’ seats for the ceremony to begin, his wards...

“So sweeepy...?”

“Pochi’s pooped, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were sprawled out in the living room after their private lessons.

“If the two of you keep that up, you might get even more private lessons, you know...” Arisa grinned wickedly.

“Nyuuu!”

“P-Pochi is being good, sir!”

Tama and Pochi quickly jumped up and adopted proper posture.

Arisa promptly fell to the floor laughing; realizing they’d been toyed with, Tama and Pochi huffed at her.

“Nyuuu...”

“Very mean, sir!”

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry, sorry.” Arisa turned to the rest of the group. “So what’s everyone doing today?”

“Concert hall.”

“Mia, I am interested in the children’s choir, I request.”

Knowing that Mia was directing the children’s choir at the concert hall, Nana asked to come along.

“Wanna come?”

“Thank you for granting permission, I respond.”

Mia’s face crinkled in a smile, and Nana clutched the elf’s hand in both of hers, celebrating even as her own face remained expressionless.

“So Mia and Nana are going to the concert hall. Are you sculpting, Tama?”

“Aye.”

Tama nodded and took the artist costume Arisa made for her out of her Fairy Pack, putting it on.

“And you’re still writing, Pochi?”

“Pochi is in a bit of a stump, sir.”

“Oh dear, really? They say it’s best to take a break or get some inspiration when that happens.” Arisa ignored Pochi’s botched take on the word *slump* and gave her advice.

“Implantation, sir?”

“That’s right, just stick a story into your brain and—wait, no! Like reading a picture book or watching performances in the park we went to before.”

Unable to ignore her mistake a second time, Arisa took pity and did a little one-man comedy routine before she continued to give advice.

“I’ve learned all our picture books by heart, sir. I’ll go see park performances, sir!”

Pochi raised her hand politely before stating her plans.

“Sounds good. What about you, Lulu? More *osechi* cooking?”

“Yes, that’s the plan. But I need some ingredients and spices for the recipes we got yesterday, so I’ll have to go shopping first.”

“It’d be dangerous to go alone. You should bring a maid with you.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I’ll be fine. You worry too much, Arisa.”

Lulu smiled brightly.

She may have been helpless before, but now her self-defense skills were strong enough to fend off a surprise attack from a lesser demon. There weren’t many people in the royal capital who would pose a threat to her.

“Are you sure? Well, at least bring your shield bracelet and a magic handgun.”

“Mm-hmm, I will.”

Lulu rolled up her sleeve to show her shield bracelet and took out the magic handgun—a magic gun Satou had acquired in the spoils from the Valley of Dragons—from her Fairy Pack.

“Liza, are you training in the secret base from yesterday?”

“No, I’ll be patrolling the royal capital to see if any red-rope monsters appear, since master is at the royal castle today.”

Liza kept her voice low so that Tama and Pochi wouldn’t hear.

She likely didn’t want to discourage them from devoting their time to their hobbies.

“Are you taking care of the same business as yesterday, Arisa?”

“Yep, I’m going to finish up some accounting at Baron Muno’s place, then go to the Echigoya Company.”

Arisa was already walking to the carriage as she spoke.

“Wait a minute, Arisa.”

Liza called out and stopped her.

“Ah, I knew it. You’ve forgotten to put on your soul shell garland.”

“Huh? Oh, goodness, you’re right. I forgot to put it back on after I changed. Thank you, Liza.”

Arisa took the soul shell garland out of her Fairy Pack.

This was an item Satou had acquired for her, an artifact to protect against her

soul vessel breaking from overuse of her Unique Skills.

“I’ve got to make sure I wear it all the time. After all, it’s proof of master’s love, like an engagement ring.”

Satou would likely have objected if he heard this, but Mia was the only one to protest with a little “Mrr.” The rest of the group all just watched her warmly.

“All right, I’m off for now! Liza, be sure to get in touch if you see anything strange.”

“Yes, of course.”

The carriage set out with everyone aboard to take them to their respective destinations, except for Liza, who intended to patrol the royal capital on foot.



“Wow, this is quite a lineup.”

Viscount Nina of the Muno Barony looked around the lords’ seats and whistled quietly.

The seats were separated by territory; each section contained up to four people, usually a combination of a territory leader, the leader’s spouse or child, a civil official, and a guardian knight.

Duke Vistall, who had been the target of an assassination attempt just days prior, was guarded by the Scarlet Nobleman Jelil, a candidate for the Shiga Eight, with many more guards on standby behind them.

Baron Muno was the only lord without an immediately obvious guardian knight.

“It sure is.”

“What an impressive sight.”

Sitting next to Baron Muno, Satou nodded in agreement.

Normally, he would be standing behind him as a guard, but the person who guided them to their seats mistook Satou for a civil official and seated him as such.

This put Viscount Nina, who should normally have been in that seat, in the

spouse's seat instead.

She tried to move to the civil official's seat at first, only to give in to the undeniable difference in comfort between the two chairs and end up settling into the spouse's seat.

"Satou, you should've at least worn some armor, since you're here as a guardian knight. You must own armor, right?"

"I'm not a big fan of armor. It's too heavy."

If any of the nearby knights heard Satou, they probably would have goggled at him.

Luckily, the lords' seats were soundproofed with a Wind Magic barrier, preventing the comment from reaching anyone else. The maids who had been assigned to each territory were stationed outside the barrier unless they were called on.

Satou wasn't even carrying his beloved fairy sword, although Viscount Nina refrained from pointing this out.

"Well, I suppose it's highly unlikely you'll have to fight anyway, with all the guards around here."

Viscount Nina doubted Satou would have to get involved unless a demon attacked or something.

"I see there are a few lords who are young or female, too."

Most of the territory lords were men in their thirties or older, but the lord of Kageus County to the west of Seiryuu County was a beautiful but cruel-looking woman in her thirties.

The young boy without the lord title was likely the heir of Lessau County, which had lost its previous lord in a demon attack.

"That young one's around your age. Poor kid. He was supposed to be married to Princess Sistina about a year ago, until he lost his mother. The wedding was delayed a year for mourning...then he lost his father, too, in that demon attack, and the marriage was called off as well."

He had failed at laying the proper groundwork before the kingdom meeting;

instead of earning the support of the other lords and high-ranking nobles, he made enemies who thought he should be demoted to viscount or even suggested that other family members had more right to the throne, Viscount Nina went on.

“Sounds rough,” Satou remarked, then appeared to lose interest in the young lord.

Viscount Nina was prepared to advise him not to sympathize too much, but at this unexpectedly neutral response, she was left to look around the ceremony hall instead.

“The priests sure are taking a while to get ready.”

Realizing that they were a quarter-chime behind schedule—about thirty minutes—Viscount Nina waved a maid over to ask how things were progressing.

The maid asked her to wait a moment and left the nobles’ seats, then sent a younger maid who was on standby to find out. The young maid soon returned and accompanied the older maid to report back to Viscount Nina.

“It appears that the head priest and priestess of Parion Temple both complained of feeling ill, and finding replacements for them took some time. Parion Temple extends their apologies and thanks to everyone for sparing a few extra moments from their busy schedules.”

“I see. And is that handsome fellow over there one of their replacements?”

Viscount Nina jerked her chin to indicate Cardinal Hozzunas of the Parion Province.

“Yes!” the young maid piped up in a squeaky voice. “The esteemed Cardinal Hozzunas himself will be a splendid substitute!”

She must have been a fan of the attractive cardinal.

“Contain yourself, will you? You’re in front of a lord.”

“I-I’m terribly sorry.”

The older maid scolded the younger for being rude in front of the baron.

“It’s fine,” Baron Muno said reassuringly, then thanked the maids for finding

out about the delay.

“Looks like they’re about to get started.”

The Holy Grail was placed in the center of the magic circle drawn on the floor, and Holy Chalice at each point of the pentagram that surrounded it. One of them was the Holy Chalice that Ms. Somienna of Vistall Duchy had transported.

The court mages—the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves—were positioned around the perimeter of the circle, while the king stood at an altar nearby.

On the king’s left was the head of the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves, holding a Holy Staff passed down from the ancestral king; on his right was Juleburg, the head of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, holding the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis unsheathed. Diagonally in front of the king was Reilus of the Shiga Eight, Holy Shield at the ready, while a line of priests stood behind him.

“So the priests stand behind the king?” Satou asked.

“Yeah, that’s the tradition,” Viscount Nina explained. “This is my first time attending the ceremony, too, but it’s been the king’s job to oversee this festival since the days of the ancestral king. The priests don’t play their part until closer to the end.”

Baron Muno, who was here for the first time as well, nodded along at Viscount Nina’s explanation.

“The ceremony will now begin.”

The king raised a sapphire scepter that appeared to be a part of the City Core.

“Head mage, the chant.”

“Shiga Thirty-Three Staves, let us commence the synchronized chant.”

The head imperial mage began directing the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves.

As their magic rose, the dragon scale powder that made up the lines of the magic circle began to flicker faintly with light.

“Power of the kingdom, fill this place.”

The king’s scepter shone blue, and magic from the City Core flowed into the magic circle, turning the blue glow from a faint flicker to a blinding flash.

Eventually, the blazing light settled and stabilized in the circle, while the six holy vessels were filled with magic in the form of pale red water.

“Gather, labors of our people.”

Wind began to blow clockwise around the air above the magic circle.

“Gather, disgraces of our people.”

The wind grew fiercer; ladies held their hair in place, while the maids fought to hold down their skirts.

Anyone with “Miasma Vision” likely saw the miasma begin to flow in from throughout the royal capital—even the area around it—and create a swirling vortex.

“Gather, all manners of evil.”

Each time the king spoke the word *gather*, the pale red liquid in the holy vessels slowly darkened.

As they watched, several maids and officials began to feel ill and were escorted out.

The barrier around the magic circle prevented the miasma gathering in the holy vessels from leaking outside, but since it still had to pass through the room to gather densely in the chalices and grail, those with weaker constitutions were still affected by its presence.

And they were not the only ones who felt the swiftly gathering miasma’s effects.



Meanwhile, at a workshop some distance away from the royal castle...

“Teacher, did you see her latest work?”

“*Donuts Frolicking with Clouds*, was it? A strange motif, but it has a remarkable charm that entrances the viewer.”

The sculptor walked with a senior pupil, observing his other students at work.

As always, loud clanging echoed throughout the grounds as the artists worked hard at their sculptures.

“Nyuuu?”

Tama, who was intently focused on her own sculpture, raised her head as she sensed a change in the air.

“Something’s weeeird...?”

“Hmm? You mean the strong winds and a slightly unpleasant feeling?” a nearby sculptor asked.

“Aye.” Tama nodded.

“That’s ’cause it’s New Year’s Eve.”

“Yeah, they’re doing the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony in the castle.”

“Not weeeird...?”

“Nah, it happens every year. Don’t worry, just focus on your sculpture.”

“Aye.”

Reassured by the adults that everything was fine, Tama nodded and resumed her work.

Thus, it was a little while longer before anyone realized something was wrong.

“So it’s begun...”

In a near-deserted park in the royal capital, a man gazed at the royal castle towering in the distance.

As he turned to his companions, the trees rustled behind him, and the birds roosting there all took to the skies at once.

“Yes, the beginning of the end.”

“The advent of the true god is upon us.”

“Our time in obscurity shall end, and a new era shall rise.”

“Yes, our dearest wishes will finally bear fruit.”

The men in hooded robes all echoed equally sinister sentiments after the first.

Crows cawed ominously as if in celebration, and the stray dogs began howling to hide their fear.

“““All shall belong to...”””

The men began to shout as one, raising staffs inlaid with curse stones, their sunken eyes glinting darkly.

“““...the Wind of Freedom!”””

The people who had been watching them suspiciously all hurried away, as if they wanted nothing to do with it.

“Ah, New Year’s Eve really is perfect for this kind of thing.”

“Indeed. The ominous winds from the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony make a great atmosphere.”

“Maybe we should have added some words like *demon lord* and *destruction...*”

Dropping the dramatic poses, the men began chatting pleasantly about meaningless details.

If Satou had witnessed this, he would have no doubt deemed it fitting for their reputation as a casual occult fan club.

“Phew. Good work, gentlemen.”

The man who appeared to be the leader lowered his hood, wiping away nonexistent sweat with his sleeve.

“...Hmm? What’s that sound?”

Noticing a clattering noise, the man looked around.

“Look! The manhole cover!”

Just as a different man pointed at it, the nearby manhole cover suddenly went flying off, and out climbed a large newt covered in red patterns—a red-rope monster.

“I-it’s a monster!”

“One of those red-rope things?”

“Heed my call, and let the dead arise from—”

“Idiot! This is no time for games! Let’s get out of here!”

The newt's tongue darted out, and its eyes swiveled toward the men.

"Oh, crap."

"W-we're gonna get eaten!"

"Ruuuuun!"

Tossing their staffs aside, the men tripped over themselves as they bolted away.

The dog-size newt moved toward not the men but the staffs, greedily devouring the curse stones attached to them.

And that was only the beginning.

On one of the streets of the royal capital's business district, a squadron of guards on patrol found some red-rope monsters that had emerged from a sewage drain.

"Yuo and Udo, help evacuate the area—everyone else, fight with me to keep the monsters contained! Don't let a single one break through and attack any citizens!"

At the squad captain's order, the soldiers readied their spears and snapped into action.

There were about five mutant cricket monsters before them that had crawled out of the sewers, their antennae waving as they searched the area.

One of the cricket monsters started attacking the soldiers.

"They're stronger than I expected..."

"Yeah, this is worse than what the reports we got at the station described."

They were armed more heavily than usual, but the guards' equipment was meant for keeping the peace and fighting criminals. It was going to be a hard fight against monsters that outclassed them, and the squad captain sensed that they would have to be prepared to take serious losses in the process.

"Send up a signal flare. Call for backup from the guards."

The captain decided it was wiser to call in knights who excelled at fighting monsters than to push his men beyond their limits.

“Signal flare firing now!”

The assistant captain shot the signal flare.

His eyes followed it into the sky above the royal capital, only to widen when he saw signal flares rising from several other places as well.

This wasn't the only place where monsters had appeared, it seemed.

Nor were the red-rope monsters the only trouble brewing in the royal capital.

“Get back! The golem is moving!”

At the residence of a high-ranking noble, the rideable golem they had just recently acquired from the Sahbe Company suddenly began moving, knocking over boxes in the warehouse as it walked out toward the yard.

“Who's in the cockpit?!”

“No one at all!”

“Damn weasels! They sold us a defective product!”

The people scurried about in a panic, running from the golem.

From below, the cockpit looked as if it was being controlled by an invisible man, the levers and pedals moving on their own.

If anyone with a high-level “Analyze” skill had been present, they likely would have realized that the golem was being possessed.

The imp that had taken over the golem cackled down at the people fleeing below.



“<Is everything going smoothly?>”

In a dark room, men with hoods hiding their faces conversed quietly in a foreign language.

“<The monsters we speed-grew with the Monster Seeds have emerged aboveground in the planned order, spreading fear and injuries among the masses.>”

These speed-grown monsters were what the people of the royal capital had

come to refer to as the “red-rope” monsters.

The men here were the ones responsible for the red-rope incidents.

“<I confess I was perturbed when the authorities seized our activation key magic tools, but it never would have occurred to me to use the slaves as disposable tools in place of the flutes.>”

“<It was less than ideal, of course. But by spreading the activation-inducing drug among the slaves, we can still produce speed-grown monsters from the creatures that were fed Monster Seeds.>” The man grimaced. “<Though the area of effect will be significantly smaller.>”

Between magic tools that sent out signal waves and animals that were fed drugs, it was obvious that the former would work on a much larger scale.

Indeed, there were far fewer red-rope monsters than they had first imagined.

“<And the summoned imps?>”

“<Yes, they have been ordered to cause chaos in the royal capital and left to their own devices. The three imps that remain under the summoner’s command have possessed the alpha monsters of territories neighboring the royal capital and are on their way here at haste.>”

“<Three? I thought we sent out four of them?>”

“<The one that was supposed to possess the hydra could not find the planned target and took over a different monster instead, only to be defeated by a passing woman warrior who appeared to be of the orangescale tribe.>”

“<Hmm, how unlucky... But no matter. As long as we have the manticore and chaos wyvern, that should be more than enough to create a diversion.>”

The map spread out on the table was littered with pawns representing battles between monsters and Shigan forces, their positions changing by the moment. This magic device, reminiscent of Satou’s map ability, was an artifact created in the era of the Flue Kingdom.

“<The royal capital air defenses have been driven away, correct?>”

“<Well, you see...>”

Sharp eyes glared at the stammering man from underneath a hood.

“<The members we had bribed were unfortunately demoted after the recent attack on Duke Vistall’s home...>”

The man remembered hearing that beetle monsters carrying giant boulders had invaded the royal capital and destroyed Duke Vistall’s manor.

Evidently, there were air defense soldiers who had been bribed by others, not just them.

“<But there is nothing to worry about. By the time the manticore and others arrive, they will no doubt be scattered around the city dealing with the flies and bats and the like. We have already sent assassins to the watch tower and lookout posts in the south. The only snag is that by the time the Wyvern Riders learn of this...>”

“<It will already be too late.>”

“<Exactly, sir.>”

“<Then let us take one more countermeasure. Place another imp under the summoner’s control and have it possess a wyvern in their barracks. If there is chaos at their base, it will surely delay their departure.>”

“<An excellent idea. I shall make the arrangements at once.>”

There were several barriers around the wyvern stable, but surely there were ways to surpass those. The man did not bother touching on that point as he left the room.

“<Just a little longer...>”

The other man bowed his head and looked at the map.

His eyes were fixed on the piece that indicated their lord, who was now in the royal castle.



“Damn it, my steel sword broke.”

“Tch, my spear, too.”

The guards were locked in an intense battle with the mutant crickets.

“It’s no good, damn it. We’re barely making a dent.”

“Don’t strike them head-on! Focus on defense! Buy time and wait for reinforcements!”

As the squad captain barked orders, he thought back to the information from the reports they’d gotten at the station. “The red-rope monsters averaged around level 10, stronger than other monsters of the same level, with glowing-red magic barriers.”

The guards’ levels ranged from 5 to 10, with an average around 7. Up against a level-10 monster, they could just barely hold their own with full equipment and the hard work of the entire squad.

But these monsters had barriers strong enough to deflect a skilled swordsman’s blow.

Simply put, it was a nightmare scenario. Every last member of the squad was bleeding somewhere or other, injured by the feelers or claws of the mutant crickets.

But just as the situation was getting dire, a beacon of hope arrived.

Ten or so knights who had seen the signal flare came galloping over from the other side of the street.

“We’re here to help! Leave the monsters to us!”

“Roger that! Thank you, knights!”

The knight captain readied his mithril alloy lance and charged straight at one of the monsters.

Red barriers formed in front of the monster to block the attack, but unlike the guards’ swords, the lance didn’t shatter.

After a moment’s struggle, the red barrier broke like glass.

But the resistance was still enough to deflect the captain’s lance from driving through the monster, grazing fruitlessly along its side instead.

“So these are the red ropes!”

The knight captain’s momentum carried him past the monster’s side.

The other knights began their charge after their leader.

Most of them broke the barriers like their captain had, or just chipped away at them, but the vice-captain who charged the monster whose barrier had already been broken was able to run it through with his lance and bring it down.

“We can do this! Once the barriers are broken, they’re just like normal monsters!”

The other knights cheered at their captain’s shout and turned their horses around for another charge.

“Sir Knight! Watch out!”

Just as the guard yelled, nearly half the knights were blown away, horses and all.

The mutant crickets, which had been fighting with their feelers and front legs until then, had suddenly started charging at the mounted knights in a body slam.

“I’ve never seen monsters with such jumping power, even with ‘Body Strengthening.’”

The knights who had been knocked aside tossed down their spears and drew their swords, charging the monsters on foot.

The knight captain’s attacks were especially remarkable.

“The Champion’s Sword from His Majesty really is something. It can even cut through these red-rope monsters’ barriers like butter!”

A few knights looked on enviously at their captain’s sword.

Champion’s Swords—mithril-plated forged Magic Swords given to the Shiga Kingdom by Nanashi the Hero—were the envy of knights everywhere.

“You alive?”

“I’m fine. Just ashamed to have been knocked down by a monster like that.”

The knights who had been thrown to the ground by the monsters stood up as the vice-captain called out to them.

“Damn, they’re still alive after a blow like that?”

“Them knights are on another level.”

The guards gaped at the knights who were standing up unfazed.

Their tough armor and trained muscles had protected them from any casualties.



“Do-do-do... Don-don-donuts...”

At the sculptor’s workshop, Tama was tapping out a peculiar rhythm as she carved.

“Gaaaah!”

Suddenly, someone screamed in the courtyard.

Tama whirled around just as something moved past her.

CRUNCH, CLATTER, CLANG... Sounds of destruction made her quickly turn back to see her sculpture broken before her eyes.

“My sculpture...”

Falling to her knees, Tama touched a fragment of her destroyed statue, in tears.

She had been putting her heart and soul into this new statue. She’d found the perfect inspiration and devoted herself to carving it out perfectly.

And now it was destroyed.

Tama was filled with rage.

GWEECHKOO.

A monster howled from the other side of the yard.

“Found the culpriit...?”

Tama disappeared, then reappeared in front of the monster.

“Feel Tama’s wraaath...?”

GWECHKO?

Looking confused, the frog-like red-rope monster shot out its curled tongue

toward Tama's face.

The cat-eared girl vanished again, and the long tongue was cut off at the base, flying into the air.

GZWEGHOOOOO.

The monster howled in pain, blood spraying from the stump of its tongue.

Then its upper half slid off to one side.

Beyond it, Tama landed with her hand held out to one side.

"Once again, I've cut a worthless objeeect..."

Tama recited an anime line Arisa had taught her.

The red light faded from Tama's hand as her anger calmed. Evidently, she had used "Spellblade" in her own body to slice the monster in half with her bare hand.

"Whooooa, you beat it empty-handed."

"So you're great at fighting, too, not just sculpting."

Tama turned around, the praise from grown-ups cheering her up.

"Ninjas are strongest bare-haaanded...?" Tama paused. "That's what Arisa saaaaid."

At this point, most things were Arisa's fault.



Around the same time that Tama's statue was destroyed...

Red-rope monsters also appeared in the peaceful park where Pochi was enjoying a *kamishibai* performance.

"Monsterrrrrrs!"

"R-r-r-run awaaaaay!"

The people trembled and ran around in panic at the sight of the monsters.

This included the children watching the performance with Pochi.

"Wh-what should we do, Ms. Pochi?"

“Don’t worry, sir. Pochi’s here, sir.”

As the other kids collapsed to the ground or clung to each other, Pochi calmly stood up.

“B-but even the grown-ups can’t beat them!”

The children pointed at the adults who were being batted around by the monsters.

Meanwhile, the storyteller was desperately gathering up the performance tools of the trade he’d dropped in surprise.

“It’s okay, sir. You should leave with Mr. Storyteller, sir.”

Pochi patted the worried child’s head and produced her katana from her Fairy Pack.

The people the monsters were chasing were battered, but fortunately none had died.

“Pochi’s day off is over, sir. Time to fight, sir.”

She loosened her katana in its scabbard as she walked up the monster, then stopped within a close distance for a quick-drawn strike.

“One-Hit Kill, si—oh, oh no, it’s stuck, sir!”

As Pochi strained too hard and failed to draw her sword, the mutant cricket charged at her.

Then the monster was slashed in two by an attack from above.

“Are you all right?”

The person who’d saved Pochi rested a broadsword on his shoulder as he spoke.

“Mr. Heim, sir! Thank you, sir. Pochi’s all right, sir!”

“That’s good. Help me out, then.”

Heim the Weedy, the seventh seat of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, glared at the new monsters emerging from the park’s pond.

“There are more of them than I expected. Don’t let any monsters near the

noncombatants.”

“Yes, sir!”

Pochi put away her katana, which she still hadn’t quite gotten the hang of, and pulled out her familiar magic short sword instead. Running after Heim, she brought down any monsters that escaped his broadsword in a flurry of movement.

Her contributions were so impressive that it made her earlier failure seem like a lie.

“It’s ’cause that sword wasn’t pruned in battle, sir.”

As she cut down monsters with ease, she mumbled something that almost sounded like an excuse.

No one was there to comment on her bungling of the phrase *battle proof*.



“I shall protect the larvae, I report.”

Her sword and shield at the ready, Nana stood in the concert hall, protecting the children’s choir from the swarm of monsters closing in on the stage.

“Miss Nana!” one of the boys cried out. “They’re coming from the wings, too!”

Nana had only come along to observe while Mia directed the children’s choir, but as she translated the short-spoken Mia’s insufficient instructions, the children started calling her “Miss.”

“Activate Flexible Shield, I declare.”

Nana produced transparent shields with her Foundation ability and positioned them to protect the wings.

“Miss Nana! Miss Mia woke up!”

“Mrr?”

Mia had gotten squashed by the panicking children when the monsters appeared, briefly knocking her senseless.

“Mia, emergency, I report. Requesting backup.”

Although Nana’s expression didn’t change, it was clear that the monsters might break through her defenses at any moment.

“Mm, ■■■■ ■■ **Balloon** *Kyuubouchou*.”

Mia activated a lesser Water Magic spell with a quick chant, knocking back the monster swarm.

“Activate ‘Shield Bash,’ I declare.”

As soon as Mia thinned their numbers, Nana mowed down the monsters that were trying to pass by her shield.

“■■■■■■...■■■ **Stream Shelter** *Ryuusui Kekkai*.”

In turn, Nana’s moves bought enough time for Mia to cast an intermediate barrier spell.

This was likely a result of their finely tuned group coordination from fighting together in the labyrinth.

“Mia, can you use Spirit Magic or attack magic while maintaining the barrier? I inquire.”

“Easy.”

Mia flashed a smug smile and a victory sign at Nana, then began a long chant.

Partway through, fly-and bat-like monsters came crashing through the ceiling to attack, but Nana easily brought them down with spears and swords.

“.....■■■■■ **Create Garuda** *Fuureiou Souzou*.”

A glittering golden bird appeared in front of Mia.

It spread its wings and floated in the concert hall with the presence of a powerful star.

“Do it.”

On Mia’s short command, the Garuda’s golden feathers shot off from its wings and began wiping out all the red-rope monsters.

“Wowzers, Miss Mia!”

“Elves are amazing.”

“That gold bird is so cool!”

As the children heaped Mia with praise, Nana gave off a tangible air of disappointment, despite her expression remaining blank.

“Y-you were cool, too, Miss Nana.”

“Yeah, for real! You protected us all!”

“Thank you, Miss Nana!”

“Larvae...”

Nana’s aura shifted to one of deep emotion as the children wisely patched things up.

“Thank you, too, Miss Mia!”

“Mm.”

Mia nodded placidly.

There were still monsters left to defeat, but it was likely only a matter of time before those, too, were gone.



“A mosquito swarm? If so, those insects are a bit too large.”

While Tama, Pochi, and the others were encountering monsters, Liza, too, had discovered something strange in the giant reservoir of the water purification plant.

The people nearby seemed to have spotted the same thing, pointing at the dark red swarm of insects swirling around above the water’s surface surrounded by a fence.

On the other side was a pipe connecting to the rest of the purification plant.

“Red insects... No, those are monsters.” Liza drew her beloved Cricket Spear from her Fairy Pack. “This would be easier if Lulu or Arisa were here...”

Liza didn’t have much in the way of anti-air attacks. She pulled out her emergency signal tool and pressed the MONSTERS SPOTTED button.

I'm sure Arisa or master will take care of the rest.

As Liza thought to herself, she charged her spear with "Spellblade."

"Those aren't just bugs! They're monsters!"

An onlooker's shout drew the insects to chase the crowd of bystanders, who started to flee.

As the cloudlike swarm of insects closed in, a red ball of light tore through them.

It was Liza's "Spellblade Shot," meant to attract their attention.

"Monsters! Come at me, if you do not fear my spear!"

She used the "Taunt" skill on her shout, luring the monsters over to her.

"Oh no! The monsters went after the lady with the tail!"

"Run for it, lady! There's too many for you to take on alone!"

Before their cries were through, the human head-size fly monsters started shooting at Liza like bullets.

Liza's posture didn't waver, even as the tidal wave of fly monsters bore down on her.

A thrust, a sweep, another thrust.

Her spear movements were standard enough, but unleashed at unbelievable speed.

Each time Liza's arm flashed, the number of monster corpses around her grew.

"That whole dark red avalanche..."

"She's taking it apart with her spear..."

"Who in the world is that lady?"

The onlookers were so amazed by the sight that they stopped to watch, their flight forgotten.

"A spear user...with a tail..." One of the onlookers muttered to himself, finally hitting upon the answer. "I know! That's Liza of the Black Spear!"

“The strongest spear user ever, who even defeated Juleburg the Unstoppable!”

Just as the men started exclaiming, a dark shadow flew out from the pipe. It was a giant bat monster, its wingspan more than thirty feet across.

It whirled through the air as if chasing the flies, then began to dive toward Liza.

“Look out!”

“It’s coming from above you!”

Liza already had her spear pointed toward the sky.

She must have sensed the bat’s surprise attack from the way the flies were fleeing in all directions.

“First flies and now a bat...”

As she muttered this, Liza thrust her spear upward, piercing the bat that dove down toward her from mouth to stomach.

Liza’s guard was still up when she heard the chime of Tactical Talk activating, followed by Arisa’s voice.

“Can you hear me, everyone? More red-rope monsters have appeared in the capital.”

Looking up at the colorful signal flares bursting into the sky one after another, Liza realized that this wasn’t the only place where something was amiss.

She pulled out a throwing spear from her Fairy Pack, taking down a fleeing fly as she listened to Arisa.

“I have our instructions from master. Take out the maps we handed out, and remember that the locations are marked in code...”

Looking at her own map from her Fairy Pack, Liza began sprinting toward her designated area.



Shortly before Liza pressed the EMERGENCY ALERT button...

As Satou and company watched, the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony was approaching its finale.

Inky black liquid filled the holy vessels, like miasma given physical form, and the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves had stepped back from their positions around the magic circle, replaced by the clergy members from each of the temples.

Just then, the emergency communication tool in Satou's pocket vibrated to indicate an alert.

As Satou reached to check who the message was from, Arisa contacted him with Telephone.

"Master, Liza and some of the others have run into red-rope monsters. Things seem to be safe so far where I am, near Baron Muno's mansion."

The three beastfolk girls had all sent out emergency signals.

"I've got a report from Lulu in the food market, too. She hasn't seen any red-ropes herself, but there are a bunch of signal flares in the sky!"

Arisa seemed to be using Telephone to talk to Lulu at the same time.

Satou opened his map and investigated the distribution of the monsters that had appeared in the royal capital.

"They've shown up in more than thirty different areas. Mostly shopping districts, markets, theaters, parks, that sort of thing. The land monsters don't have a wide range of movement, but there are flying monsters like insects and bats that have spread over a considerable area."

"There's no damage in the noble district?"

"Only places where lots of lesser noble homes are packed close together, where people were having garden parties, and so on."

"Huh... It's strange that they wouldn't attack the royal castle."

The places where the monsters had appeared seemed to follow a pattern.

There were no monsters in range of Satou's radar.

"Think it might be a diversion?" Arisa asked.

"Most likely."

As they spoke, Satou saw a messenger run up to the prime minister, gasping for breath.

Word about the red-rope monster appearances must have been coming in.

“Then their real target...”

“Yeah, it’s probably here.”

Satou felt an unease he couldn’t quite describe at the much-too-obvious tactic.

“You stay there, master. You can give us directions on where to go, like an armchair detective. We’ll take care of the trash mobs.” Arisa’s voice was cheerful.

“All right. I’ll let you guys handle it. Connect me to everyone with Tactical Talk, please.”

“Okey-dokey!”

“It looks like something’s going on. I’ll go see what I can find out.”

While Arisa reconnected the spell, Satou excused himself to Viscount Nina and Baron Muno, discretely placed a seal slate for the Return spell in a nearby arbor, and moved to another part of the castle.

I’m sure Arisa and the others can take care of the big outbreaks. I’ll clean up some of the ones that have spread out individually, just to be safe.

Satou selected Remote Arrow from his magic menu, opened his map, and began locking on to flying monsters that had spread across a wide area, monsters that were gaining the upper hand over soldiers, and so on. Three volleys shot into the air, for a total of 360 magic arrows, and started decimating the monsters.

He didn’t send any to places with crowds of people or especially intense battles.

If he tried to shoot at monsters in the middle of a melee, he worried that he might accidentally kill someone who got between the targeted monster and the Remote Arrow. Satou’s attack magic was more dangerous to the average person than any monster.

For these cases, he used the nonlethal spell Remote Stun instead. It wouldn't be enough to defeat the red-rope monsters with their high defenses, but it should at least buy valuable time for the people dealing with them to escape or get into a better position.

Once he finished sending out support fire, he returned to the arbor from before, then went back to the lords' seats.

"Master, I had everyone get their maps out. Your directions?"

"There are three large monsters approaching the royal castle, but you can ignore those. We've got the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves here who can shoot them down from a distance, not to mention three Shiga Eight Swordsmen and Jelil. Don't worry."

When none of the group objected, Satou went on to direct them to places that needed more backup, telling them to hurry.

"Master, did you give directions to the Echigoya Company already?"

"Yes, of course."

There were several powerful defense golems at the Echigoya main location and its two factories, so Satou had given orders to open them up as evacuation shelters for nearby citizens.

Once he'd finished giving immediate orders, he told Viscount Nina and Baron Muno about the appearance of red-rope monsters.

"I see...so that's what all the chaos is about," Viscount Nina said. "Looks like our ritual is in the final stage now anyway."

In the center of the ceremony hall, the inky liquid in the Holy Chalice was being poured into the Holy Grail to collect it all in one place.

The priests and priestesses began the chant for the cleansing Ritual Magic.

The liquid in the Holy Grail wriggled like a slime, attempting to escape the vessel, but the blue light the king commanded kept it in check.

Finally, the Ritual Magic was invoked, and the dark liquid shrank a little.

Evidently, the spell would be repeated several more times until all the black

liquid in the Holy Grail was gone.

It looked like it would still take a while before that happened, though.

Satou expanded his map window, focusing on the movements of the points of light.



“Sorry, I’ve got to go—something urgent came up. I think you’ll be safe here, but be sure to lock the doors and stay inside after I go, just in case.”

Arisa bounded out of the study in Baron Muno’s mansion and told the first maids she ran into, Erina and the newbie, that she was leaving.

“Gotcha.”

“Did something happen?”

Just as the pair responded, an alarm bell rang out to announce a state of emergency.

“Took them long enough to sound the alarms,” Arisa muttered as she ran down the hall.

Most likely, the person who was supposed to ring the bells had hesitated out of fear of disrupting the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony happening in the royal castle.

“Arisa! Whatever is happening, pray tell?!”

“B...uh, Lady Karina!”

Lady Karina came running out of her room after hearing the alarm.

Arisa almost said her internal nickname for Lady Karina of “boob-lady” out loud, managing to catch herself just in time.

“Arisa! Two monsters are approaching Muno Castle from the sewers.”

Satou’s voice came in through Tactical Talk.

At almost the same moment, there was a crashing sound and a scream from the house next door.

“Lady Karina! Monsters detected!”

“Understood, Mr. Raka!”

Lady Karina's Intelligent Artifact Raka gave her the alert, and she promptly jumped out the window still wearing a dress, leaping across the wall that separated the neighboring house. Behind her, the noblewoman in charge of teaching Lady Karina manners screamed in rage and despair, but Lady Karina didn't appear to notice.

"Ms. Erina, Lady Karina went next door."

"Newbie, the ladder! Grab the ladder; we're goin' after her!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Lady Karina's two guardian maids ran to the shed.

"Master, Karina ran off to intercept those monsters."

"Let her take care of it, then. You go meet up with Lulu right away."

"Okey-dokey!"

Since the maids were no longer watching, Arisa used Space Magic to teleport to their royal capital manor, then used Clairvoyance to confirm her destination before teleporting near Lulu.

"Luluuu!"

"Arisa!"

Lulu turned around, surrounded by smiling vendors and customers.

Beyond the crowd, amid foods that had been scattered everywhere, were the corpses of several monsters that had been shot in the vitals by a magic gun or had their necks broken.

"Looks like you're already on top of things."

"Well, master took care of about half of them."

Lulu explained Satou's Remote Arrow barrage to Arisa, who hadn't seen it.

"Wow. That's our master for you."

Arisa used Space Magic to confirm that there were no more monsters in the area before taking Lulu's hand and running down a back alley.

"Thank you, miss!"

“Come back anytime! I’ll give ya a big discount!”

“Thanks for saving us, black-haired lady!”

The people Lulu had saved called out their thanks as she ran away.

Once they were out of sight, Arisa teleported atop an aqueduct with Lulu in tow.

“There’s more of them than I expected.”

According to Satou, the birdfolk soldiers of the royal capital air defense were in a fierce airborne battle with red-rope monsters; the Wyvern Riders had been delayed by some kind of trouble and were on their way to intercept the large monsters coming toward the royal castle, slowing down their response to the monsters that were flying around above the royal capital like they owned the place.

Satou’s Remote Arrows had exterminated a significant number of them, but plenty of monsters still remained.

“Lulu, defeat all the monsters you can see. Did you get master’s permission to use the Fireburst Gun and laser gun?”

“Yes, I’m on it.”

Lulu nodded at Arisa, already taking the Fireburst Gun out of her Fairy Pack and aiming at the monsters.

“I’ll take them down!”

She began shooting down any and all monsters within a thousand-foot radius, each shot landing a certain kill.

“Well, I can’t let you have all the fun.”

Arisa blasted a swarm of fly monsters to bits with the Fire Magic spell Fire Storm, then used Blast Shot on a bat that burst through the first round of flames, turning it into ash before it could reach her.

When the two of them finished taking out all the enemies in their sight, Satou’s voice echoed in their ears.

“Arisa, go get Mia, please. There’s no one around her.”

“Okey-dokey.”

“Nana, once the guards are there to defend the concert hall, head to the point I specified before.”

“Yes, master.”

“Mia, use pseudo-spirits to wipe out the monsters on the ground.”

“Mm.”

Arisa and Lulu were to meet up with Mia, then restore public order in the royal capital from a high place with a good view.

“We have orders from Lord Kuro. We are to cease business operations for the day and evacuate any nearby citizens into our headquarters. Store employees will put away all products on display and clear an area for shelter. We’ll open up space from the basement storehouse to the fourth floor.”

In the Echigoya Company headquarters, the manager Eluterina was briskly taking charge.

“Manager, should we send a contractor over to factory manager Polina to let her know?”

“No need. Lord Kuro has already gotten in touch with Polina.”

“Understood. I’ll begin preparation for the evacuation procedures, then.”

“Please do.”

Tifaleeza called for a few of the other executive staff members and began assigning employees to help with guiding citizens, making physical preparations, and so on.

“Manager, where are we supposed to put all our products?”

“Just shove them into our personal rooms. As long as it’s not the office or the kitchen, anywhere is fine.”

Before the frantic work was even finished, evacuees began coming inside.

Relief filled the citizens’ faces as they saw the powerful-looking golems protecting the entrance.

“Red-ropes! There’s red-rope monsters!”

As a man came running in bellowing, the golems surged forward, and the heavy doors closed.

The man collapsed, covered in blood, and a staff member with healing magic immediately began treating him.

The clanging and crashing of the monsters and golems fighting outside was audible through the walls.

“Mommy, are the monsters gonna eat us?”

“Don’t worry, dear. I promise I’ll protect you.”

A mother held her frightened child to her chest.

The other evacuees all looked shaken to some extent as well.

“No need to worry.”

Speaking calmly, Tifaleeza addressed the evacuees and pointed at the row of executive staff members lined up along the vaulted second-floor corridor.

“All hands, fire!”

On the manager’s command, the girls all used attack magic or enchanted staffs to annihilate the red-rope monsters.

While they didn’t have much combat experience, the girls had been leveled up in a safe place enough to be capable of strong attacks. It helped that the manager’s strategy was built around their strengths.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the city...

“Liza, take a right at the intersection up ahead. You’ll see knights fighting some giant mutant rats.”

Sprinting through the streets at breakneck speed, Liza skidded around the turn like a speed skater and headed past the intersection.

“Targets spotted. Engaging now.”

Leaving a trail of red light in her wake, Liza blew past the knights like a gust of wind, impaling the rat monsters as she went.

“Targets destroyed. Next target spotted.”

“Go for it. After that, there are more monsters on the other side of that building at the end of the street. The soldiers there are in trouble.”

“Understood!”

Doubling up on the “Body Strengthening” skill, Liza’s running speed increased even more as she eradicated two giant mutant rats that were devouring a corpse.

“Helix Spear Attack!”

Liza crashed through the building before her to launch a surprise attack on the rat monsters on the other side.

As the rubble flew through the air, Liza’s spear pierced one giant mutant rat’s heart, sending shock waves through to the other side.

By the time the other giant mutant rat whirled around to face her, Liza’s spear was already piercing through its jaw.

“The next target is three blocks away. You don’t have much magic left—be sure to drink a mana recovery potion and a nutritional supplement potion.”

Obedying Satou’s directions, Liza pulled the magic potions out of the pouch at her waist and drained them, then sped off toward her next destination.

“Damn...”

“Was that one of the Shiga Eight?”

“Had to be, right?”

“Never knew a person could get that strong...”

As the guards looked on in admiration, Liza vanished in a cloud of dust.

“Pochi, head to the street three blocks ahead with Sir Heim.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Heim! The next enemy’s this way, sir!”

“Are you talking to someone?”

As he ran alongside Pochi, Heim asked something he’d been wondering about.

“N-not at all, sir. Pochi’s not talking to anyone, sir. It’s just Pochi’s maidenly instincts tingling, sir.”

“Dunno what that means, but apparently it works.”

Hearing the sounds of battle up ahead, Heim gave up on questioning Pochi and used “Body Strengthening” to close the distance in moments. Pochi’s short legs pumped frantically to keep up with Heim.

“I’m Heim of the Shiga Eight! Here to help!”

Arriving at the scene first, Heim shouted to the knights and guards who were struggling.

“Sir Heim!”

“We’ve got backup from the Shiga Eight!”

The despair fell away from the men’s faces, replaced with the light of hope.

“Pochi is Pochi, sir! Pochi’s here to help, too, sir!”

Pochi attempted to imitate Heim, introducing herself as she jumped into the fray.

“It’s too dangerous, little girl!”

“Stay back!” the men exclaimed with concern as Pochi followed Heim.

But their warnings soon gave way to stunned silence as they saw Pochi swing her Spellblade-infused sword to slice up monsters one after another.

Seeing that her swordsmanship was virtually on par with Heim’s, the men’s concerns turned to cheers.

“Pochi, once you’re done there, go to the park up ahead.”

“Yes, sir!”

“You sure you’re not talking to someone?” Heim asked again doubtfully.

“O-of course, sir. Pochi’s maidenly instincts are just shining, sir.”

Heim seemed to be enjoying Pochi’s reactions more than actually trying to get the truth out of her. Her secret was safe for the time being.

“I am here to help, I report.”

“Ms. Nana!”

Arriving in front of the Echigoya factory, Nana called out to the manager Polina, who was guarding the entrance.

Many workers from the neighborhood were gathered on the factory grounds, including kids who appeared to be students at the royal academy.

“There are monsters causing trouble in the factory next door,” Polina explained to Nana as she led the way toward the wall around the perimeter.

“Hey, it’s the blonde booby lady who hangs out with the young master.”

“Her name’s Ms. Nana, you dummy. Ms. Nanaaaa!”

Louna, the executive who rode around on a stone fox, and the redheaded Neru, who was carrying a Wind Rod, waved to Nana.

Merina, another executive staff member, was there with Louna to observe.

The girls were around level 30 thanks to level grinding on captive-bred monsters, with various magic skills. Now, they were stationed alongside the defense golems at the border with the other factory.

“I was just bringin’ over a delivery from the café, and someone handed me a Wind Rod and everything. It’s a waste of my cute uniform, I tell ya!”

“Maid outfits are perfect for battle, I report.”

Neru and Nana began chatting about maid outfits.

“Nana, have everyone get back. There’s a monster coming.”

“Monsters incoming. Back away from the wall, I request.”

Shortly after Nana’s warning, monsters burst through the wall.

“Stupid crickets! Fight me if you do not wish to be called toilet bugs, I declare!”

Nana’s shout, infused with the “Taunt” skill, drew the monsters’ ire toward her.

Her Magic Sword and shield massacred one monster after another.

“I’m gonna join in, too!”

“We can’t let this newcomer show us up.”

Neru’s Wind Rod knocked back a mutant cricket, and Louna’s Earth Magic spell Toss Stone impaled the cricket from below, while Merina fired the Lightning Magic spell Thunderbolt.

“Geh, our magic bounced off!”

“So that’s the red-rope effect?!”

“We’ve gotta get rid of those barriers!”

“Leave it to me, I declare!”

Nana’s forehead protector hid the glow on her forehead as she used her Foundation ability Break Magic to destroy the barriers protecting the red-rope monsters.

“Now, I report.”

At her prompting, the girls used their spells, this time successfully destroying the monsters.

Around the same time...

“Nin-niin...”

Tama, decked out in her pink ninja outfit, jumped from roof to roof as she raced toward a voice crying for aid.

“Someone help! My mom is trapped under rubble!”

“Okeeeey...”

Just as she helped the trapped person out from under the rubble...

“My daughter’s still on the second floor!”

“Sir, you mustn’t—you’ll be burned alive if you go back in! Wait for a Water Magic user to arrive, I beg you!”

Next was a person trapped in a burning building...

“On my waaay...?”

Dousing herself in water, Tama sped up the wall and in through the smoking second-floor window.

“I’m baaack...?”

She soon returned with a young girl in her arms.

“Aah, Cina!”

“Father!”

Waving to the father and daughter as they embraced, the cat-eared girl set off in search of others who needed help.

Tama the Cat Ninja would never allow tragedy to strike on her watch.



Such miracles were occurring throughout the royal capital all at once, but even this remarkable group of girls could only save so many.

There were some soldiers and knights still fighting hard without their help.

“That’s finally the last of ‘em...”

The bedraggled men helped each other up, wrapping bandages around the worst of their injuries.

Even the relatively well-off knights couldn’t afford to drink magic potions lightly.

“Yeah, we barely took down those crickets. Don’t think we woulda made it if one of those rats showed up.”

“Yeah, maybe if we had a Champion’s Sword like the captain. Our steel swords and lances wouldn’t be much good...”

These words might have sounded pathetic, but in truth, the soldiers and knights who first encountered the giant mutant rat had faced heavy losses.

Even the reports said it was the strongest of the red-rope monsters: Even with several royal knights surrounding it, they had been unable to defeat it until Ryuona the Grasscutter of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen happened to arrive and defeated it.

“Eeeeeek!”

A high-pitched scream rang out from one of the adjacent alleys.

“Shit, must be a monster that got away.”

“Guess we got no time to rest.”

The knights ran toward the alleyway.

What they found there was not the mutant cricket they expected but the back of an enormous rat-like creature—a giant mutant rat.

The twitching appendage sticking out of its mouth appeared to be the leg of a mutant cricket that had gotten away from the knights.

The girl whose scream had attracted their attention was trapped under the rat’s paw. She was out cold and motionless.

“Damn it, speak of the devil...”

“We can’t just run away, though.”

“Damn right. I swear on the pride of the kingdom knights, we’ll save that girl.”

“Yaaaaah! Pick on someone your own size, you beast!”

The knights ran up to the giant mutant rat, taunting it from behind with every ounce of courage left in their souls.

The rat, which was starting to sniff the girl, turned its attention to the men.

Its wicked eyes stared down at the knights, who swallowed, now fearful for their own lives.

Yet even as they trembled, their determination as knights and men kept their feet planted firmly in place.

But reality is cruel.

The knights were knocked aside with a single swing of the rat’s tail.

As blood trickled into his eyes, one of the knights looked up to see the giant mutant rat lifting the girl toward its mouth.

“Shit, I can’t move... Come on, damn you! Fight for just a little longer!”

The man cursed, trying to rouse his battered body into action.

“Wow, what a brave young man. You shouldn’t push yourself so hard, though.”

As the knight's vision faded, a young woman dressed like a barmaid and holding a broom appeared before him.

"I'll take care of this. You just rest for a little longer, okay?"

The young woman admonished the knight like someone scolding a child, spinning the broom in her hands.

She was apparently planning to fight the monster with only a broom.

"R-run for it... A broom won't do anything against that thing..."

He tried to warn her that a little bit of magic or martial arts wouldn't be nearly enough to drive off such a powerful beast.

"It's fiiine, don't worryyyy."

The barmaid flashed the knight a peace sign. Her face was covered with a recognition-inhibiting veil like the kind worn by nobles traveling incognito.

"Come at me!"

The giant mutant rat snapped its tail toward the barmaid like a whip, but she easily parried it with the broom.

Angered, the rat tossed the unconscious girl aside and swiped at the barmaid with the same paw.

The barmaid with the broom dodged the attack with a light hop. At the same time, invisible hands lifted the unconscious victim and gently deposited her in front of the knight.

"Take care of her, okay?"

As she spoke, she brought the handle of her broom up to knock the monster on the chin.

The enormous creature's head cracked backward as if it had been struck by a giant's hammer.

"Wh...that's impossible!"

The knight stammered incredulously at the unlikely sight, like something out of a hero legend or perhaps a comedy.

“Hmm. It’s got a barrier like someone who’s overdosed on demonic potion.”

With a wave of the girl’s hand, the red barrier protecting the rat monster broke instantly.



No one else who witnessed this would realize she had used a chant-less Break Magic spell.

“There, this should do it!”

The barmaid struck the monster’s chin three more times with the broom, and it crashed into a nearby house, reducing the building to dust and rubble.

“Whoops. Am I gonna get sued for that?”

As the girl uttered such out-of-place concerns, the knights began dragging their wounded bodies to their feet, readying their weapons toward the monster.

True knights could never allow a young girl to do all the fighting for them.

Their blazing eyes made that much clear.

“Glad to see the spirit of the Shiga Kingdom knights still burns strong, all these years later.”

The barmaid crossed her arms and nodded wisely.

Even half-buried under the rubble, the monster was still swinging its tail around wildly, preventing the knights from getting any closer.

Sparks flew each time the tail clashed against a knight’s sword or shield.

“All right, I’ve got a special treat for you guys. Check it out—I have the power!”

She struck a heroic pose, but no one commented.

The barmaid raised her broom, and the knights’ swords all began to glow.

If anyone present had the “Analyze” skill, they would have seen that she had used the advanced Practical Magic spell Divine Blade.

“And here’s a bonus!”

This time, the knights themselves were all bathed in light.

Their wounds began to close, and strength and courage filled their bodies. This was another advanced Practical Magic spell, Hero Play, which had long since been lost to time.

“The rat’s back up! Prepare to attack!”

The giant mutant rat dragged itself out from the rubble and swung its tail, but the knights dodged with ease.

“I see it! I can see where the tail is going!”

As the rat whipped its tail again, one of the knights blocked it with a glowing sword.

Where before it had sent up sparks each time it clashed with a blade, this time the tail was lopped off the second it touched the sword.

“What?!”

The knight who had cut the tail off stared at his own sword in surprise.

Seeing this, another knight charged up to the rat monster from one of its blind spots and thrust with his longsword.

Again, the red-rope pattern across the rat’s body flashed and formed a barrier—which broke instantly with another wave of the girl’s arm.

The knights attacked the rat one after another.

“Mito, stop playing around.”

“Ah, Sky. What do you mean, playing?”

A girl with long silver hair and sharp eyes jumped down from the roof to land in front of the so-called barmaid—Mito.

Like Mito, she wore a recognition-inhibiting veil that covered the lower half of her face, but all of the knights who were present confirmed that her features underneath the veil were beautiful.

“Done with the flying monsters already?”

“A skilled sharpshooter and a Fire Magic user brought them all down before I even got there.” She looked a little sulky about it. “Mito, look at that.”

The silver-haired girl called Sky pointed up with a slim, pale finger.

Looking up as well, the knights saw three enormous monsters flying above the royal capital.

“Ooh, big ones.”

“Shall I call in my real body?” Sky asked.

“Mm, let’s not. I think the real you would cause more damage here than just leaving them be.”

“That’s an unfair assessment.”

“I think it’s an extremely fair assessment.”

Mito jumped her way up a nearby wall onto the roof, while the silver-haired beauty followed with bat-like wings.

“Looks like they’re headed toward the royal castle.”

“Hmm. Perhaps our help will not be needed, then?”

“Nah, probably not. I think they’ve got Claidheamh Soluis and Gjallarhorn, and probably a Holy Swordsman and a few of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen’s successors, too.”

“Shall we keep watch from close by, then?”

“Yeah. We can step in if things get dicey.”

“You’re so overprotective.”

“Ah-ha-ha, don’t be silly...”

The two women jumped from rooftop to rooftop, heading toward the royal castle.



“I’m concerned...”

Baron Muno’s kindly features were clouded with worry.

Another priest performing the cleansing on the Holy Grail had been sent to the rear.

Three of them were now in a state of overdose from using too many magic recovery potions, and two had been hit by high-concentration miasma, for a total of five priests that had been forced to tap out and be replaced.

The only two who remained from the beginning were Cardinal Hozzunas and

an elderly level-50 priest.

“...What’s wrong?”

Viscount Nina looked at Satou, who had suddenly jerked his head up.

“Something’s coming.”

Just as he spoke, a different alarm bell rang out.

A shadow too big to be a wyvern appeared, circling overhead.

“Is it an alpha wyvern?” Viscount Nina asked.

“It’s called a ‘chaos wyvern,’ apparently.”

Satou’s AR display said that it was level 60.

“I-it’s coming! We’re under attack!”

Baron Munio pointed up at the sky.

The chaos wyvern dove toward the ceremony site, crashing into the barrier that the prime minister had created with the City Core.

The barrier cracked, and a powerful gust of wind blew away the Wind Magic sound barriers surrounding the lords’ seats.

“*Pierce*—Blue Butterfly Gun!”

The magic gun user of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, Helmina, was the first to fire.

““““Spirits of the royal capital, destroy our enemy!””””

Several City Core lights flashed from the lords’ seats, firing at the chaos wyvern as it crashed down with the splinters of the barrier and piercing the magic that protected the monster.

“I suppose that is the best we can do with borrowed power.”

“It looks stronger than a hydra.”

Count Seiryuu and Count Kuhanou glared at the wyvern as it tumbled along the ground, shrieking.

“Duke Vistall, Baron Munio, we should step in, too.”

“Hmph, as if we need to be told by the likes of you.”

“O-of course!”

The young heir to Count Lessau hadn’t joined the battle, either, but he didn’t have control over their City Core yet, leaving him to cower behind the protection of his knights.

While most of the ministers had pieces of the City Core as well, only the minister of the military, Marquis Kelten, and the vice-minister, Count Boppan, were able to join the lords in the attack.

The imperial knights guarded the VIPs who were observing the ritual, while the Holy Knights surrounded the chaos wyvern.

“Shiga Thirty-Three Staves! Use synchronized sorcery! Don’t let the time the lords bought us go to waste!”

““““Yes, sir!””””

The mages began a long chant at the head imperial mage’s command.

“Hya-haaaa! This one’s miiiiine!”

With a depraved bellow, a scantily clad woman charged up to the chaos wyvern.

“It’s Ryuona the Grasscutter from the Shiga Eight Swordsmen!” someone exclaimed.

“Take thiiiiis! Death Guillotine!”

A giant scythe of blazing red Spellblade carved an arc through the air and struck the enormous wyvern’s neck.

At first, it looked like the neck had been lopped off in one blow, but a clawed wing blocked the brunt of the attack.

“Tch, this thing moves fast for such a big lug.”

Ryuona jumped back.

“You there, kid! Yeah, you! The one who fought Mr. Gouen for an even match! Help me out!”

When Satou hesitated at Ryuona's demand, Viscount Nina prodded him on.

"Go on, we'll be fine. The other lords will protect the baron and me."

"All right. I'll be back."

"Use this, friend of the witch!"

As Satou started forward empty-handed, Count Kuhanou tossed him the ceremonial mithril blade hanging at his waist.

"Thank you!"

Satou drew the stylish blade and fought the chaos wyvern alongside Ryuona.

Seeing this, the Scarlet Nobleman Jelil requested to join the fray as well, but Duke Vistall ordered him to focus on defending his lord.

"We've got more company!"

Count Zetts looked up at the sky and shouted.

One was a level-50 sky-running tiger monster called an "airwalk tiger," while the other was a level-52 manticore, a beast with the head of an old man, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bat.

"The chant is finished!" the head imperial mage shouted. "...Inferno!"

A crimson vortex, amplified many times over by the synchronized sorcery, engulfed the two monsters in fire.

The airwalk tiger managed to leap out of the flames, though its hind legs were singed almost into ash, sending it tumbling to the ground.

The Holy Knights surrounded it at once and finished it off even as it shot off wind blades.

"Impressive for mere humans." The manticore spoke in the Ancient Language, smoke rising off its body as it landed. *"But carrying on a chant for so long is akin to asking your target to dodge it."*

As the manticore sneered, Helmina's bullet hit the side of its face.

BAWOOOOOWN.

The manticore sprayed out icicles in a counterattack, aiming at Helmina and

the royals.

“Not on my watch!”

Reilus of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen protected the king with his Holy Shield.

The lords were guarded by their City Core barriers, but since the king was aiding with the ceremony, he entrusted his protection to his men.

“Juleburg, I grant you permission to leave my side. Defeat the monster.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Juleburg handed Claidheamh Soluis off to the king’s page and accepted his trusty spear from Helmina.

“We priests can handle this part, Your Majesty,” Cardinal Hozzunas said to the king. “Please use your power to protect yourself.”

The cardinal’s forehead was bleeding; he must have been hit by one of the manticore’s icicles.

“Much appreciated. I shall take you up on your offer.”

When the king stopped providing assistance to the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony, the sticky black liquid lashed against the sides of the Holy Grail, trying to overflow.

“You’re not getting away.”

His hands glowing, the cardinal grabbed the liquid and pushed it back into the vessel.

The other priests and priestesses exclaimed in shock.

“It’s too dangerous, Your Grace! It will sap your life force and drain you dry!”

“Please, worry not for my sake. We must not let the ritual be interrupted.”

The cardinal smiled, his white teeth sparkling.

But a vein was popping on his forehead as he grappled with the miasma, and his arms were being dyed jet-black.

“Great spirit of the royal capital, King Seterarik of Shiga asks your aid. Binding chains of justice, constrict my enemy! ■ Restrain Enemy!”

The king used the power of the City Core to bind the manticore to the ground.

“Reilus, you too. Join Juleburg and destroy that monster.”

“No, Sire, my job is to protect you.” Reilus blocked a desperate volley of icicles from the manticore with his Holy Shield. “Besides, Sir Juleburg has more than enough backup.”

Having defeated the chaos wyvern, Ryuona the Grasscutter and Pendragon the Untouchable were fighting the manticore alongside Juleburg the Unstoppable.

“Impressive. Ryuona is faring well, too, but none can match that man’s spear skills.”

“Agreed. Although I must say, Sir Pendragon’s contributions loom large to me as well.”

Upon Reilus’s comment, the king looked more closely at the battle.

“I see. He’s hindering the manticore’s evasive attempts and letting Juleburg and Ryuona attack it, while blocking its attacks toward the two of them so they don’t get hurt.”

True to his nickname of “Untouchable,” Satou was darting around without a scratch, despite being on the front lines.

At the tender age of fifteen, the boy had a frightfully promising future, the king thought.

“Quit struggling already!” Ryuona shouted. “We need wind! Get this fog out of here!”

The manticore had covered the area in cold fog.

While everyone waited for someone to scatter the fog, with no one actually producing the required Wind Magic, something was happening near the Holy Grail.



“The miasma has been condensed enough. Let us forgo the rest and begin the purification at once.”

The priest who was directing the ceremony spoke to the cardinal.

“No, that won’t be necessary.”

“What do you mean, the purification won’t be necessary?!”

The cardinal only smiled at the dubious priest.

“But, Your Grace...if we stop now, the miasma we gathered from the area will fill the royal capital, and the citizens will fall sick from serious miasma poisoning!”

“I fail to see the problem.”

The other priests stared in disbelief at the cardinal’s callous words.

“What are you saying? The children at the orphanages you visit and the elderly of the slums will be the first to fall, you realize?”

“Survival of the fittest is the way of the world. I only regret that I cannot see them suffer with my own eyes.”

“Has all this contact with dense miasma affected your mind? Call for backup; the cardinal is—”

“My mind is not so weak as to be reshaped by miasma, I assure you.”

The cardinal stopped the priest who was calling for a relief squad.

“Then why...? A renowned holy man like yourself who serves the Goddess Parion would never...”

“How repulsive. The thought of serving such false idols makes me sick.” The cardinal’s smile vanished, replaced with an intense glare. “I serve only one god. I am but an apostle, here to call the true god back to us.”

“False idols... The true god... You’re a demon lord worshipper?!”

Just as the priest realized the cardinal’s true nature, the manticore’s fog spread and covered the area.

“Divine intervention, indeed.”

The cardinal flicked his fingers, and the inky black liquid that filled the Holy Grail rushed toward the priests who were blinded by the fog.

Their faces covered in the sticky slime, the priests were dragged into the Holy Grail. In seconds, their life force was sapped out of them, turning them to agonized husks.

“Now, time for the finishing touch.”

Standing in the center of the Holy Grail, the cardinal spread his arms like an actor on a stage.

As if on cue, several crystals rose out of the dense black liquid and floated in the air around him.

“O black crystals, heed me and grant my desire.”

The cardinal grasped the crystals—the Evil Philosophia—and swallowed the largest piece in one gulp.

“NGAAAAAAAAH!”

The cardinal clutched his head and chest in intense pain.

The turban-like cloth wrapped around his head fell away, revealing a tuft of violet hair for just a moment.

“O Lord, the one true god. Our tragic god who was sealed away in the moon by the evil plotting of the foolish false idols.”

His voice quavered as he prayed to the sky.

Ripples of dark violet light ran down the cardinal’s body, forming a magic circle of the same color at his feet.

“Let this fragment of thy body serve as a medium to free thee for a moment from thy fetters. Use the fragment that dwells within me as thy guide to manifest on this earth.”

As he reached up to the sky, a multitude of magic circles appeared and covered the royal castle—no, the entire royal capital.



“Sky, look at that!”

An enormous magic circle had appeared, the royal castle at its center.



“That magic circle... Oh no. This is really bad!”

The silver-haired girl who had been watching the battle at the castle from the top of a faraway steeple turned, concern showing on her sagacious face for the first time.

“I-is that what I think it is?”

“Yeah. It sure is.”

Even Mito, who was normally so carefree, looked tense as she stared back at Sky, who’d reached the same conclusion.

“I’m transferring to my real self. Please look after this body.”

After she declared this with a sorrowful expression, the beautiful girl suddenly crumpled like a toy that had run out of batteries.

Mito caught her before she hit the ground.

“.....Connection lost. Master has logged out. Restoring avatar control authority. Shifting to autonomous mode. Mito, your command?”

In Mito’s arms, the collapsed Sky began reciting what sounded like system messages in a monotone voice.

“Whew. Is Sky going to make it in time, or is the royal capital going to be destroyed...?”

Mito changed out of her barmaid outfit and replaced it with a robe from her “Inventory.”

“At any rate, you can help out, too. Um, what’s your name again?”

“I am a semi-autonomous dragon’s-blood homunculus,” the being who had been called Sky responded. “I do not have a designated name.”

In other words, she was a homunculus that had been possessed by the being known as Sky until a few moments ago.

“Well, since you’re a homunculus, I’ll call you ‘Homu-Homu (temp.)’ for now.”

“Name order received from Sub-Master Mito. This device is now designated as ‘Homu-Homu (temp.).’”

Once she gave the homunculus a name at random, Mito stuck her hand into the still-open “Inventory” and pulled out some equipment.

“I don’t have my Holy Staff or Holy Husk Mobile Armor...”

Equipped with a long staff and an angelic robe, Mito hopped from one spire to the next with Homu-Homu in tow.

“Guess that means I’m only half as strong as I was back when I was king. And even at the time, I only managed because the dragon god showed up... Ugh, enough whining!” Mito smacked herself on the cheek. “The summoning’s not over yet! I wasn’t fast enough to stop it last time, but I’ll manage this time no matter what it takes.”

Psyching herself back up, Mito launched into the air toward the royal castle.

“Homu-Homu, back me up, please.”

“Order confirmed. Guarding Mito.”

Mito kept pushing forward—almost as if she knew the person she’d been waiting for was just up ahead.

“I can’t let this slow me down. Especially not before I get to see Ichirou!”

Mito sped through the sky.

It was up to her to prevent catastrophe.

The “God”

Satou here. A furious battle against a powerful, worthy opponent is great fun in video games, but I’ve never once wanted to fight a strong enemy in real life. I’d much prefer to live my life on easy mode.

“What’s that?”

As I fought the manticore that was bound down in glowing blue chains, a powerful “Sense Danger” reaction behind me made me turn around.

Something was happening in the area where they were performing the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony, beyond the thick fog the manticore had created.

My “Sense Danger” skill had never reacted so strongly before.

This must be pretty bad news.

“...Huh?”

For just a moment, there was a purple flash of light past the fog.

“Sir Pendragon! Don’t get distracted!”

Just as I heard Sir Juleburg shout, the manticore’s scorpion tail crashed toward me.

I immediately moved to parry it, then stopped and let the blow knock me in the direction where I’d felt the “Sense Danger” reaction.

“Satou!” Helmina cried.

Twisting around in midair, I saw dark purple pillars rising into the air from the center of the ceremony.

Several fractal-patterned magic circles made up of smaller, intricate magic circles were growing and spreading out from the pillars like waves.

That included the ground I landed on.

At the same time, the range of my “Sense Danger” grew larger.

I’ve got to erase these things.

As soon as I landed, I used Break Magic from my magic menu.

The magic circles cracked and broke into shards of violet light—but only a small portion of them.

“...They grew back?”

The nearby magic circles resonated and rebuilt the ones I had broken.

Using Mana Drain from my magic menu made the targeted magic circles disappear, but they disconnected from the adjacent magic circles, preventing the effect from spreading. And as soon as I stopped absorbing their mana, the magic circles grew back.

“Whoa!”

Something floated up into the sky from the center of the fog.

I started to follow it, only to be met with a glob of pink flying at me.

While the “Magic Power Armor” I immediately produced protected me from harm, it slowed my movements by a moment—although otherwise, the panic from my “Sense Danger” skill would’ve prompted me to fly into the sky while still dressed as Satou.

“You’re a tough one, *boing*.”

It was a pink demon with an unstable form—one of the annoying ones that could slip into so-called gaps.

“Looks like you’re different from the last one.”

“*Boing?* Have you fought us, the servants of the pink lord, before, *boing?*”

There was no time for pointless conversations.

I used my mithril sword to slash the pink demon’s core in two.

“Cutting attacks don’t affect us—*boing?*”

The *boing* demon lost its form and fell to the ground, turning into black mist and vanishing.

“Master, above you! Something’s happening! It’s bad news in the sky, too!”

I heard Arisa shouting through Tactical Talk.

Looking up, I saw thick clouds forming and swirling above us, possibly created by the magic circles that were beginning to rotate and send up purple sparks.

The rays of the sun could no longer reach the royal capital through the thick vortex of clouds, and a cold, ominous wind began to blow.

“It’s the mastermind at work. My Break Magic couldn’t stop it. Arisa, can you or Mia do anything about it with magic?”

“No way.”

“Your Break Magic didn’t work, master? I have magic-disrupting Space Magic and Fire Magic spells, but they’re not as strong as yours.”

I was afraid of that.

“All right. Get everyone together and change into your gold armor. I’ll give more orders soon.”

“Okey-dokey! The golden knights will get ready to roll!”

Hopefully that wouldn’t be necessary, since things looked really bad this time around.

I kept that thought to myself as I turned my attention away from Tactical Talk and transformed into Nanashi the Hero.

“Can you hear me, Your Highness?”

I contacted the king with Telephone and told him to evacuate immediately.

Considering the obvious irregularities at hand, the king didn’t object, and the dots indicating him and the prime minister on my radar started moving. The feudal lords and ministers also followed behind the king.

The rest of the people present began evacuating with the protection of the imperial knights.

“Lord Satou!”

Someone came toward me through the fog.

Geh, it's the princess.

She must have seen me get knocked back and come to check on me.

I could see her guards and ladies-in-waiting following her through the fog.

I guess I can't just leave her here.

I used Magic Hand to grab the princess and her entourage and took them all with me to teleport to a point near the king's office.

"Wh-where are we?"

""""Your Highness!""""

As the princess and company exclaimed in surprise at the sudden teleportation, I flew up into the air.

"Nanashi the Hero!"

"You should get out of here. It's dangerous, and the king will be worried."

"But that's—what about Lord Satou? Where is he?"

The princess started to object, then panicked when she saw that Satou wasn't here.

"You mean the boy who got sent flying by the manticore? Don't worry, I already dropped him somewhere safe."

I kept floating higher as I spoke, then used "Flashrunning" to speed toward a shadow floating near the magic circle in the air, which was probably some kind of summoning circle.



I'll knock him out first.

I threw a flying kick toward the figure hovering near the magic circle, only to be blocked by a dark violet spherical barrier.

The barrier sent out a shock wave that knocked me backward.

"An attack from behind is a bit cowardly, wouldn't you agree?"

The person turned.

“Cardinal?”

Though he looked different without his trademark turban, it was undoubtedly Cardinal Hozzunus of Parion Province. For some reason, a tuft of his hair was dyed purple.

His priestly robes were now inky blank, sleeves fluttering unnaturally.

“And you are? Judging by your actions, I must assume you are not here to celebrate the advent of our god, hmm?”

“I’m Nanashi. A hero from the Shiga Kingdom.”

The advent of a god...?

“What god? Do you mean Parion?”

At that, the cardinal’s expression showed a mixture of scorn and bemusement.

“Parion is no god of mine.”

He practically spat the goddess’s name.

An AR display popped up next to his face. It showed two titles I had never seen before: **Devil Worshipper** and **Devil Protector**.

Don’t tell me...

“Are you trying to summon the Evil God to the royal capital?”

“That’s correct.”

Seriously?!

I assumed it was going to be a demon or a demon lord, but this was even worse. And the most alarming part of all was that the patterns in the magic circles looked like it might actually work.

“Our god was trapped by the craft designs of the foolish false idols and sealed within the moon. But we shall create a temporary form to summon him to this land!”

Well, that’s a small comfort. At least it wasn’t going to be a complete summoning.

Still, I really didn't want to fight what Doghead had described as a superior version of me.

"Sorry, but I'm going to stop this ritual even if I have to kill you."

While I never wanted to take any lives, this situation might call for it.

"It's too late. You cannot stop the summoning, even if you do kill me. This magic circle will be our god's guide to descend. It is a true miracle born of the Evil Philosophia created by the Holy Staff and the divine ability given me by the true god."

Divine ability from a god... Did he mean a Unique Skill?

I opened the detailed information about Cardinal Hozzunas in my AR display.

Unlike the last time I looked, he now had the Unique Skill "Call Immortal."

The Evil God-related titles were new, too. There were also new skills like "Interrogation," "Torture," "Seduction," "Charm Person," and Summoning Magic, not that it mattered at this point. Sure, it made it more likely that the cardinal was the one who'd summoned the imp, but it was a little late for that now.

"Cardinal of the Parion Province... So your true identity is a reincarnation and a leader of the demon lord-worshipping group Light of Freedom?" I muttered the truth that was previously hidden in his job field.

"I see. When I lost my hand as a price for 'Call Immortal,' I must have dropped my Brace..."

He raised his arm; his hand was missing from the wrist down, turned into salt and scattered on the wind.

The fact that I was able to see his AR information now that he'd lost his Brace of Stolen Divinity meant that the device had been strong enough to fool even my AR.

For the sake of my sanity, I desperately hoped that there weren't many other Sacred Treasures or Artifacts that worked the same way.

"Let me correct one of your assumptions. I am no reincarnation. This streak of violet hair is a stigmata from my revered god. Proof that I received a share of a

divine ability.”

“An ability? From who?”

“I’m afraid that is a secret. A Geis is quite strong, you know.”

Evidently, someone had placed him under a Geis.

“Your Majesty, seems like they’re trying to summon an evil god.”

“Wh-what?!”

“Evacuate the citizens to a safe place. And if possible, I could use some help destroying the magic circle.”

“Understood.”

As I tried to get information out of the cardinal, I used Telephone to request aid from the king.

While I was at it, I also contacted the Echigoya Company manager to have her evacuate everyone to safety.

Whoa!

Two telephone pole–size transparent spears came flying at me from the side. I hurriedly took evasive action.

I nearly didn’t notice them because the powerful “Sense Danger” reaction from the magic circle almost drowned everything else out.

A newcomer?

I turned toward the source of the attack and saw yet another giant spear coming at me.

Gah!

This time, the spear exploded when it got near me like a missile with a proximity fuze, raining glass-like shards at me.

I activated “Magic Power Armor” as I dodged with “Flashrunning.”

“Target sighted. Eliminating now.”

A silver-haired beauty assailed me with long, thin claws, emitting the same glittering light as the telephone pole–size spears.

I brought Claidheamh Soluis out of Storage to block her attack.

“Master, is that a new opponent? Should I have Lulu snipe her? Or Mia can send a pseudo-spirit to back you up?”

“...No, I’m fine. But if anything comes out of the magic circle, attack it on sight.”

I spoke to Arisa through Tactical Talk as I blocked the silver-haired girl’s barrage of attacks.

According to my AR, she was a dragon’s-blood homunculus called **Homu-Homu (temp.)**.

I only noticed her bat-like silver wings and scale-covered tail when she used them to block my sword at point-blank range.

“Homu-Homu, the summoner with the Unique Skill is the other guy! I’ll take care of him; you keep the purple-haired one busy!”

“Order received, Mito. Suppressing purple-haired opponent.”

The distant voice came from a black-haired girl clad in white robes, flying up through the air.

Transparent weapons floated around her, likely the work of Practical Magic, following her movements like support items from a shooting game.

Her name was Mito, as Homu-Homu had called her; her face was covered with a veil, as if she didn’t want anyone to recognize her. This must be the same woman Zena and Nana’s sisters told me about.

She was level 89 with a magic battle-based skill set. She had a ton of titles, too: Hermit, Hero, True Hero, King, Ancestral King—wait, what?

Mito had a hidden second name.

Yamato Shiga.

Evidently, she was the actual Yamato the Hero who had founded the Shiga Kingdom.

She had another name, too, but I had no time to worry about that right now.

“Stop! I’m not your enemy.”

“Sub-master Mito’s orders are absolute.”

Since Homu-Homu wasn’t listening, I used my “Gap Defense” and “Flashrunning” skills to leave her behind and flew toward Mito.

Up ahead, I could see her and the cardinal locked in a furious exchange of blows befitting two high-level opponents.

The weapons floating around Mito blocked the dark purple tentacles that flew out of the cardinal’s hands, and Mito used multiple kinds of magic to assail him.

But the spherical violet barriers forming around the cardinal blocked all her magic.

They weren’t strong enough to hold up to advanced attack magic, but by the time Mito launched her next spell, a new barrier was already forming.

“My dear citizens, listen close...”

A three-dimensional projection of the king appeared above the royal castle and in several other places throughout the royal capital.

The king told the citizens to evacuate immediately, directing them to underground shelters. Whatever City Core power or magic device was powering this, it was a great way to make an emergency broadcast. The soldiers and guards began helping people evacuate immediately.

I decided to let them handle things on the ground and turned back toward Mito and the cardinal, still locked in battle.

Mito was running out of floating weapons to protect her.

“<Dance,> Claidheamh Soluis!”

The scripture activated my Holy Sword, which split into thirteen thin blades and flew into the air.

The pieces of Claidheamh Soluis floated over to surround Mito and slash away the tentacles attacking her.

“Huh? Claidheamh Soluis?”

“Mito! That’s the guy who plotted this summoning!”

As Mito looked around in surprise, I called out the truth to her.

“What are you saying?! So you would betray our cause?!” The cardinal smirked as he lied through his teeth to complicate the situation.

“Shut up!” I shouted back.

Hesitant, Mito looked at me. She must be analyzing me.

“You...don’t have a name? Mystic Camouflage?”

“Look at my titles! I’m Nanashi the Hero of the Shiga Kingdom!”

Ignoring the unfamiliar term, I directed Mito away from my blank name field toward what I wanted her to see.

“Nanashi the Hero? ...A True Hero!”

“Exactly!” I shouted back, fending off attacks from Homu-Homu as she caught up to me.

“Homu-Homu, that guy’s not our enemy. It’s the one with the tentacles!”

“Target reassignment order accepted.”

Once Homu-Homu began attacking the cardinal, I switched Claidheamh Soluis from protecting Mito to backing up the homunculus, positioning myself to protect Mito if needed.

“Mito, can you break that magic circle floating in the air?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

As Mito looked up at the magic circle, the veil hiding her face fluttered enough for me to catch a glimpse of what lay beneath.

Her face looked a lot like Nanashi’s—the one I modeled after an adult version of my childhood friend.

“...Hikaru?”

“H-how do you know that name?”

Mito was thoroughly taken aback when I muttered the name without thinking.

I looked again at her other name in my AR display.

There was no doubt about it; it was the real name of my old childhood friend.

But we didn't have time to question each other's identities right now.

"I'll explain later! Just focus on destroying that magic circle, please!"

"...Got it."

Mito used a chant-less spell to obliterate a piece of the circle, but it rebuilt within seconds.

She tried another kind of magic, too, which only led to the same result.

"I knew it, greater magic isn't enough. I'll have to use my trump card. Keep him off me while I chant, okay?"

"Sure."

I nodded, and Mito began a chant.

If Mito was taking the extra time for a chant even though she could use chant-less magic, it must be some kind of forbidden curse. That was the only explanation I could think of.

"That forbidden curse seems a touch dangerous. I could easily stop her were it not for those blasted Holy Swords...", the cardinal muttered.

He must not have been able to move freely with the spherical barriers active.

"To realize our great ambition, to manifest our great god..."

Whatever he was muttering didn't seem like a chant or anything, and since the tentacle attacks had paused, I took that moment to make my move.

First I brought the Holy Sword Durandal out of Storage and tried slashing at him, but it felt like when I hit Doghead's "Anti-Physical Barrier."

"Mana Drain" and Break Magic didn't work on the spherical barriers, either; maybe they were related to his Unique Skill.

If physical attacks won't work, I'll just use magic.

I selected Laser from the magic menu and fired at the cardinal's spherical barriers.

The laser bounced off the spherical surface, though it did leave a faint crack.

A stronger spell could probably break through. When Mito's advanced attack

magic destroyed the spherical barriers, they immediately produced new ones; maybe a concentrated laser attack with continuous destructive power could pierce them for good.

The problem was that the shock waves from destroying the barriers would definitely kill the cardinal.

I told him that I would stop this even if I had to kill him, but I still hesitated despite myself.

“...I offer my body as sacrifice. Come to me from the demon world, O demon rulers.”

Violet light shimmered over the cardinal’s body.

Was he trying to summon demons with his Unique Skill?

The answer soon made itself clear. A crack appeared in the air next to the cardinal, and an ashen hand emerged from within.

It was a level-50 lizard-headed intermediate demon with ram-like horns.

“Homu-Homu, get back and protect Mito!”

Even with Mito’s support magic on her, Homu-Homu was only level 40. This would likely be too much for her.

Homu-Homu and Claidheamh Soluis broke away from fighting the cardinal’s tentacles to reposition in front of Mito.

“I’ll take care of these guys.”

“What a gallant hero.” The cardinal looked amused. “But I’m not done yet, you know.”

Several more waves of purple light coursed through his body. At the same time, his shoes turned into white crystals and crumbled away, his pant legs flapping as white powder fell through.

I guess that’s what he meant by “I offer my body as sacrifice.”

“Do you intend to fight an entire army from the demon world?”

As the cardinal spread his arms wide, countless cracks appeared behind him, demons appearing one after another.

It was a terrifying number; I could see why he described it as an army.

The demons emerging in all shapes and sizes lined up behind him, like an army from hell prepared to do battle with the forces of heaven.

Several noticeably larger cracks formed with a quake in the air, and truly gigantic demons emerged.

“G-greater demons...,” Homu-Homu whispered behind me in horror.

She was right; they were undoubtedly greater demons, the most powerful kind.

The demons spread their wings, shrouded in dark miasma, and launched ponderously into the sky above the royal capital.

If there were a minstrel here, they might have described these demons as death incarnate, a symbol of destruction and despair.

“H-Hero...”

Homu-Homu scooped Mito into her arms and retreated.

Mito continued her chant, but her voice was more shaken than before.

So the army of demons appearing before me was enough to frighten even the ancestral king Yamato, who defeated one of the three greatest demon lords.

“Heh-heh-heh... Looks like your friends decided to retreat.”

The cardinal sneered down at us.

This must be his true personality, hidden beneath the virtuous guise.

“Nanashi the Hero... Do you really think you can stand up to my forces alone?”

Behind the triumphant-looking cardinal, the demons used support magic on each other, preparing for battle. In my AR display, their attack and defense power skyrocketed.

They already outnumbered me, and now they were making themselves even stronger.

It certainly seemed like a hopeless situation.

Except...

“I’m not alone.”

A blue ball of light pierced through the sky and struck one of the greater demons in the face, exploding on impact.

It was, of course, from Lulu’s Acceleration Gun.

“Impossible! A second-named greater demon brought down by a single attack?”

The exceptional power was likely because she’d used a specially made Holy Bullet I’d overcharged with magic.

I’m sure it was Arisa’s order to boldly use one of our limited supply of overcharged bullets as the first attack.

“Golden knights, assemble!” Arisa exclaimed through Tactical Talk, and I heard each member of the group respond.

“Feather Storm.”

Mia’s voice echoed, and golden feathers flew from behind to slice through the ranks of lesser and intermediate demons, burning them away and slowing the greater demons’ movements.

“Tally-hooo...?”

“Hally-to, sir!”

Next, enormous balls of flame engulfed the greater demons.

Those were from the six-chambered Magic Cannons mounted on the airship.

A moment later, our airship came into view from the direction of the royal capital park, with the rest of my group aboard. Arisa appeared to be steering at the moment.

“Liza, demon incoming! A fast one!”

A rocket-like demon flew toward the airship at high speed.

“Draco Buster!”

Standing at the bow, Liza destroyed the demon just as it flew past.

The tentacles it launched in its final moments twined around her legs, wrenching her off the airship.

“Liza!”

“On it.”

The Garuda flying alongside the airship spread its wings, catching Liza.

I wish they wouldn’t do things like that—I nearly had a heart attack.

“So this is the attack that destroyed the Ancient Dogheaded King and the Golden Boar Lord!”

As he watched this unfold, the cardinal exclaimed an incorrect assumption.

“You ready to surrender?”

“Such foolishness...! *<Open>!*”

An Item Box opened next to the cardinal.

His tongue shot out in the form of a tentacle and swallowed something jet-black through a hole at the end. I shot a concentrated laser immediately, but the spherical barrier delayed it just long enough to be too late.

The black object I saw for just a moment was labeled **Evil Philosophia Fragment**.

“Nnngh... GRAAAAAAAH!”

Even though the cardinal hadn’t screamed when my concentrated laser carbonized part of his face and shoulder at point-blank range, now he was tearing at his chest and bellowing.

Poison?

“If it will summon my LORD... I will sacrifice EVERYthing with no REGRETS.”

The cardinal’s voice turned ragged as he spoke.

I thought for a second that he was committing suicide by poison, but apparently I was wrong.

“GUARGRGHOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

The cardinal’s skin turned black, the surface of his body rippled, and his

clothes tore away to expose an armor-like shell. His now-insectoid body was covered in dark violet gems and crystalline patterns. There was something very sinister about it.

His title now read **Martyr** in my AR display, and his race had changed to **Miasma Demon**.

He didn't appear to be a demon lord, but I sensed that he was even more powerful than the greater demons around him. This was one opponent I couldn't take lightly.

The cardinal's body continued to transform.

His neck stretched beneath his still-handsome features, and the tentacles at the ends of his wrists branched off and curled in the air.

"So you're not even human anymore?"

APWUOSSSSS.

The cardinal howled like a demon.

His transformation must have gone so far that he couldn't even converse anymore.

APWUOSSSSS.

Waves of violet light continued to run across the surface of the cardinal's transfigured body, summoning more and more demons.

I focused my eyes on the cardinal.

I'd hoped that he might turn back to normal if I made him cough up that Evil Philosophia Fragment, but my "Search Entire Map" no longer showed it inside his stomach.

There would likely be no miracle for him, unlike the time when Sir Gouen was absorbed by the Demonic Heart.

Just as I took aim with my concentrated laser at the head of the cardinal—or rather, the Miasma Demon—Arisa sent word through Tactical Talk.

"Master, east! Tama is sensing something to the east!"

...East?

My radar didn't show anything.

Opening my map, I saw a point of light approaching from far off in the east faster than the speed of sound.

"Message from my master. 'Take shelter,' she says."

With that declaration, Homu-Homu carried Mito, who was still chanting, even farther from the magic circle.

Oh no—

"Get the airship away from the demons and the magic circle!"

It was no use. They wouldn't make it in time.

"Nana! Skip the precheck and activate Mobile Fortress, stat!"

"Yes, master."

The airship changed its course, and the Mobile Fortress feature I'd built into it activated.

An instant later, there was a blinding flash of light, and a massive ray swept across the demons.

Most of the demons were obliterated instantly, and even the greater demons that managed to defend themselves were left smoking and half-dead.

The Miasma Demon's spherical barriers were blown away as well, and its body was charred behind the burnt remains of the tentacle it must have used to defend itself. Judging by his health bar, he had just barely survived.

"Wh-what was that?"

"Dragon Breath."

It was unbelievably powerful for something that had been fired from so far away.

No wonder people said that dragons caused even more damage than demon lords when they joined the fray.

"Is anyone hurt?"

"No, we're fine—gwaaaaaaaah!"

The silver sky dragon blew through at subsonic speed, its massive 300-yard-long body sending off shock waves that tossed the airship around.

ABQUOZZZZ.

The sky dragon caught the Miasma Demon in its jaws as it flew past us.

Then its fangs pierced the demon's body, pulverizing it without leaving a trace.

"Master! The magic circle!"

"I know!"

Even before Arisa said anything, I'd already noticed that the magic circle had begun flashing frantically, as if it might summon something at any moment.

Just as the cardinal said, the magic circle hadn't disappeared even with the summoner gone.

At this rate, we wouldn't be able to avoid fighting an evil god.

I whirled to look at Mito, our last shred of hope.

".....■■■■■ Divine Destruction Shin'i Houmajin!!!"

Mito lifted her staff, and her voice rang out across the sky, raining wind chime-like sounds down all over the royal capital.

An instant later, Mito's magic wiped out the magic circle covering the royal capital without a trace.

"Is it over?"

"Master, don't jinx it! Down below! There's still the magic circle on the ground!"

Arisa yelled at me for letting slip a portentous comment.

"It's fine—see?"

As Mia spoke, lights appeared all over the ground, forming together and striking the magic circle.

There was a sound like countless glass panes shattering, and the magic circle broke apart.

“Athena.”

The Shiga Thirty-Three Staves had used a synchronized spell to destroy the magic circle on the ground.

“Wow, I guess they’re not half-bad.”

“Stuck-up.”

Mia scolded Arisa for her superior-sounding compliment.

“Master, the clouds are clearing up, I report.”

Nana was right: The vortex of clouds that had formed above the magic circle was clearing away.

As light shone down through the dispersing clouds, the airship came closer, and I landed on its deck.

“I guess that settles things for now?”

I breathed a sigh of relief.



“Master, it’s not over yet!”

“Tama is really scared, sir.”

When I landed on the airship deck, everyone ran over to me except for Arisa, who was still piloting the ship.

The clouds had cleared away, but the sky began to darken.

It was an eclipse. The sun was being covered by the shadow of the moon at an unnatural rate.

“Satou! This is bad. The spirits are upset. They’re going to cry. They’re all fleeing toward the ground! They’re afraid of what’s above, up in the sky.”

A rare speech from Mia emphasized the danger as I gazed up at the violet-tinted moon now covering the sun completely.

Three dark lines appeared in front of the purple moon.

As soon as I saw them, I was paralyzed by a full-body chill, as if an icicle had bored into my spine.

Even with “Fear Resistance” at maximum, it wasn’t enough.

I couldn’t fully shake off the fear.

I remembered what the cardinal had said: *“It’s too late.”*

And not long after: *“This magic circle will be our god’s guide to descend.”*

Were those three lines a portent of the god’s appearance? Or vestiges of a failed summoning?

They were too far away to show on my map, but I knew it couldn’t be good.

“Masterrr...”

“Satou...”

Tama burrowed under my cloak and clung to my leg, trembling.

Mia grabbed on tightly to the other leg.

For now, it seemed like the three of us were the only ones who realized how terrifying those three black lines really were.

“They’re huge...”

The lines looked to be around ten yards wide, six miles tall, shaped like human shadows but much too thin...

They only looked thicker when I first saw them because the black lines were absorbing light.

They descended slowly, hovering some five hundred yards above the royal castle.

It was then that they finally entered the range of my map.

The information said only **UNKNOWN**, the same message I’d seen from the mysterious little girl who’d made quick work of Doghead.

“This is bad, this is really, really bad. We’re in trouble.”

“Let’s leeeave...?”

Mia and Tama trembled.

I didn’t want to push them away when they were scared, but I had a feeling

that this thing would destroy the royal capital if it made a move.

“Stay on the airship, all of you. I’ll take care of this part.”

I gently pulled the pair off me and handed them over to Liza and Lulu.

“Master, what is that? Is it really that bad?”

“Yeah. It’s worse than a demon lord.”

As I responded to Arisa through Tactical Talk, I used “Skyrunning” to head over to Mito and Homu-Homu, who were staring up into the sky near the airship.

“Do you know what that is?”

“Uh-huh. It doesn’t look exactly like last time, but it’s an Evil God’s Spawn, a piece of the Evil God that’s been partially summoned.”

Mito’s face was pale.

She seemed to be one of us who could tell how terrifying this thing was.

“You’ve seen one before?”

“Yeah, although it was more like a black slime that time.”

“How did you defeat it then?”

“There’s no normal way to beat it. Swords and magic won’t work. Only a god, or a demi-god like Sky, stands a chance of damaging it.”

Mito looked up at the sky dragon circling in the sky.

“Last time, Sky called the Dragon God, who defeated it for us.”

That wasn’t going to happen this time.

Because I had accidentally killed the Dragon God.

“Thanks for the information. Leave the rest to me.”

“Huh? Leave it to you...? It might be a Spawn, a fragment, but it’s still a god, you know.”

“Don’t worry...”

I used “Skyrunning” to float off the deck of the airship.

“...This isn’t my first time killing a god.”

Mito stared at me in stunned silence. I smiled at her and headed off to face the three lines.

“Arisa, take the airship outside the royal capital at full speed. Be ready to use teleportation so you can get away if things go wrong.”

I gave orders to Arisa, who was still in the pilot’s seat.

“No! I can’t do that!”

“That’s right, sir! Allies of justice never run away, sir!”

“Pochi is right! Who will protect the people of the royal capital if we run away?!”

Arisa and Pochi protested.

“We’ll let you take care of bringing it down, master. But we’re going to save anyone who hasn’t gotten out of the city yet!”

“Master, I agree with Arisa!”

“Master, the larvae must be protected.”

Lulu and Nana chimed in.

“I’m scared, but I’ll fiiight...?”

“Yes, I’ll do everything I can.”

Tama and Liza agreed, too.

“All right. You guys protect the royal capital.”

My response was met with a chorus of cheers.

“But! You have to swear not to overdo it! If I give the signal, you get out of there with Arisa’s teleportation! Got it?”

I had to make sure they knew that this situation was dead serious.

“Wait, I’m coming, too.”

Mito jumped into the air behind me as I headed for the three lines.

“No need. Hate to say it, but you’ll only slow me down.”

I was a little harsh because it would be too dangerous for her to come along.

“...Fine. At least let me support you, then.”

Mito used a chant-less support spell on me.

Wow. It was sparkling too much to be even remotely stealthy, but the stats of my weapons and armor were nearly tripled.

“Satou.”

The Garuda cut through the air to fly up to my side.

Arisa and Mia were riding on its head.

“Here’s a special strengthening present from your beloved Arisa!”

A surge of strength heated my body.

It was Arisa’s advanced Fire Magic spell Body Strengthening.

“And here’s a bonus!”

She used a Space Magic protection spell, too.

Arisa and Mia both teleported on top of Mito.

“Wh—aaaaaah!”

Hanging off of Mito, Arisa grabbed Homu-Homu’s hand and teleported all four of them back to the airship.

Garuda was still floating beside me.

Maybe as my bodyguard?

“““You can do it, master!””””

Arisa and the others all called out encouragement through Tactical Talk.

The airship headed off to rescue the people left in the royal capital suburbs, with my group and Mito aboard.

“I guess I should go, too.”

I used “Flashrunning” to move toward the three lines floating above me.

Wonder if we’ll be able to talk it out...



“It’s huge...”

I stopped across from the three jet-black lines.

...Hmm?

A blast of bright red flames flew toward the lines from the royal capital.

It appeared to be a synchronized spell from the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves—but as soon as it hit one of the lines, it evaporated instantly.

The base of the black line curled into a spiral and...

Uh-oh.

I used “Flashrunning” to get between the line and the royal castle.

By a hair’s breadth, I managed to pull out my Divine Blade and change my title to “Godkiller” just in time.

As the line tried to strike the royal castle like a whip, I blocked it with my Divine Blade.

The line threw off jet-black sparks and split into two when it hit the blade.

As the flying sparks faded, I saw their true color. They weren’t pure black but a very deep, dark purple.

Oof, that’s heavy.

Even when I used “Skylrunning” to fight the inertia, the weight still pushed me down until I nearly collided with the castle.

Without Arisa’s and Mito’s support magic, I probably would have been completely overcome already.

But the situation still wasn’t good.

I had friends in the castle below, including the people from the Muno Barony. And I’d gotten to know people like the king and prime minister too well by now to let them die.

The Shiga Thirty-Three Staves certainly made their own bed by attracting the line’s attention with a reckless attack, but I wasn’t going to abandon them,

either.

I piled on my own Body Strengthening skills.

A surplus of power coursed through my body.

But it still wasn't enough.

At this rate, it would only be a matter of time until I lost.

RYWURWAAAAE.

A golden talon pushed me back up from behind. Garuda.

Blue light beamed up to me from the royal castle, giving me more strength. The king must have used the City Core's power on me.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Yelling with renewed effort, I used my shaking arms to hold up the divine sword and push back against the black line.

After an instant that seemed like an eternity, the struggle ended, and the black line was repelled, moving back from the royal castle.

"...Phew."

I'd managed to make it through.

But the part of the black line that had ripped apart furled back into the rest and repaired itself.

I used "Skylarking" to get away from the castle and head toward the bottom of the black line, which was turning to make its second attack.

Destroy.

I felt my heart pound heavily in my ears.

Destroy our enemies.

Ba-dump, ba-dump. The black aura around the Divine Blade pulsed in time with my heart.

A voiceless demand issued from the blade into my mind.

I demand an offering. Sustenance.

My magic drained into the sword at an alarming rate.

If this kept up, I'd pass out from extreme magic loss before I could fight.

I pulled out the Holy Sword Excalibur from Storage and drained the magic I'd saved from it, restoring my rapidly decreasing magic.

As it absorbed my power, the jet-black blade slowly grew longer.

By the time I had used up all the magic stored in the Holy Sword, the Divine Blade was over ten yards long.

Destroy.

The message from the Divine Blade changed.

Give me true power.

Words rose unbidden in my mind.

The end of the black line turned toward me, as if sensing the presence of a natural enemy.

I spoke the words in my mind out loud, as if compelled by the blade.

"Divine Blade... <Destroy>."

Maybe I shouldn't have done that.

...Total darkness filled the eclipsed sky.

All the light that touched my blade was destroyed.

...Silence fell over the jet-black sky.

All the air that touched my blade was destroyed.

And then...

The black line that touched my blade evaporated into violet mist, ripping apart and vanishing as if being absorbed into the jet-black Divine Blade.



I used “Flashrunning” to sprint up the length of the line, destroying all six miles in an instant.

One down, two to go.



Fortunately, the black lines didn’t seem to have any sense of camaraderie; even with one destroyed, the other two continued to float motionless in the sky.

Now I could just destroy them one at a time.

“Huh, this will be easier than I thought...”

I was so surprised by their unexpected fragility that I accidentally let a little comment slip.

But when I looked down, what I saw doused my brightening spirit in ice.

Far below, a corner of the castle had completely disappeared.

Fortunately, the keep where the people of the castle were gathered appeared intact, but if I had used the Divine Blade’s scripture a little closer to it, I would have done something awful that I could never undo.

Sorry, sorry.

I decided to focus on the matter at hand and do some more serious repentance later.

My AR showed the range of <Destroy> as a few hundred yards. It would probably be best to lure the lines high into the atmosphere before using it so I wouldn’t do any damage to the ground below.

I attacked one of the lines with the long-ranged Laser spell, then used my divine sword in its <Destroy> mode to start erasing it.

While it was hard to breathe up here without any air, judging by my health and stamina bars, I should last at least an hour or two. What an overpowered body, if I do say so myself.

...Hmm.

The surface of the line broke before my eyes, and a split end of sorts lashed out at me like a whip.

When it pierced into the range of <Destroy,> the black whip began falling apart, but it still kept closing in on me. I used “Flashrunning” to avoid its movements, faster than the eye could follow, while twisting around in the air to slash at it with my Divine Blade.

Behind me, a tall spire that the whip had touched was hollowed out, City Core protection and all, and began to crumble.

If an attack like that hit me, even my tough body would definitely take some serious damage.

I turned my gaze forward to find more split ends peeling off the black line, turning into more black whips.

Ugh.

The whips attacked me left and right, and I dodged them by a hair’s breadth, destroying them one by one with the Divine Blade.

The battle unfolded in midair like a dance with death, each step pushing my abilities to the limit as I kept avoiding the whips and paring down the black line.

“...Phew.”

Finally, I managed to defeat the second line.

At this point, I wanted to scold my past self for taking it so lightly after beating the first one.

I was lucky the third line didn’t move even while the second one was destroyed; if they’d attacked me at the same time, I doubt I could have defeated them both without a scratch.

...“Lucky,” huh?

Why *was* that black line still just floating there anyway?

Thus far, the black lines had behaved like nonaggressive monsters in MMORPGs: They didn’t move unless they were attacked directly, even if the other black lines were under fire.

Was it because the cardinal who summoned them was no longer alive to give them orders, or did they serve a different purpose to begin with? It was just too strange.

I only spent a few seconds wondering about this, but apparently it was a few seconds too long...

White light suddenly appeared in the darkened sky, as if the morning sun had risen.

The light concentrated into a cluster of rays and crashed into the final black line.

Without slowing down, it sliced off a piece of the black line and kept moving, reducing a grain-producing area beyond the royal capital to ash and craters.

It was the sky dragon's "Dragon Breath."

The sky dragon swooped down at a speed to rival my "Flashrunning," assailing the last black line.

With teeth that could pierce anything, the sky dragon tore into the black line, ripping it up with glittering talons.

The sky dragon soared out of the royal capital with the bottom end of the black line still clutched in its teeth and claws.

The remaining half of the black line turned its end into a giant jaw and started to chase the dragon.

I don't think so.

While the black line was targeting the sky dragon, I used "Flashrunning" to close in on its other end above the royal capital and started destroying it with my Divine Blade's <Destroy>.

The first half or so went smoothly, but then it appeared to change its target from the sky dragon to me partway through, and I got stuck doing another dance of death against the black whips.

I have to say, a battle where you can't let your guard down for a second is even more tiring the second time around.

I was lucky I at least had the One-Hit Kill attack of my Divine Blade.

As I was destroying the last of the third line, the sky dragon must have finished tearing up its other end, too.

The violet fog began to fade, starting from the sky dragon.

“Phew...*now* is it over?”

I heaved a sigh and headed over to the wounded sky dragon.



KUROOOOUIUUUNN!

I frantically dodged the sky dragon’s breath attacks with “Flashrunning.”

Storing my Divine Blade in Storage, I tried to get closer.

“Stop! I’m on your side!”

The sky dragon ignored my cry, shooting off more breath attacks at random.

The blasts carved new valleys in the earth and razed hills and mountains.

Did it get drunk on battle or something?

“Wake up!”

I delivered a flying “Flashrunning” kick to the side of the dragon’s face, trying to stop its rampage.

It was strong enough to break one of the dragon’s giant fangs, yet it still didn’t come to its senses.

In the corner of my eye, I saw a remnant of the black line clinging to its scales.

“That must be what’s causing this...”

The line had tinged the silver scales black, possibly fusing with them. The scales that were entangled with the black line were making crackling sounds like breaking glass, cracks forming all over.

KUROOOOUIUUUNN!

The sky dragon gave a shriek of distress as the black line spread across its scales.

I can speak dragon language, but I still couldn't make out any words, so it must have been a truly wordless cry of pain.

The sky dragon swung its tail around wildly and flung itself upward, bounding into the sky.

Uh-oh.

In its agitation, the sky dragon's head turned toward the royal capital.

I managed to catch up as it started charging at high speeds toward the city, grabbed its enormous tail, and dragged it back, swinging it in a huge circle in the air and tossing it away from the royal capital.

I know it sounds cruel, but I had no other choice.

If such a massive dragon landed in the royal capital, I can't even imagine how many lives would be lost.

There was a booming *thud* and a cloud of dust, and the sky dragon's back turned the grain fields outside the royal capital into a wasteland, carving out a valley.

Sorry, farmers. I'll fix it later, I promise.

"All right, then..."

I produced my Divine Blade from Storage.

Destroying the majority of the black lines must have satisfied it; the pulsing had died down, and it was no longer in <Destroy> mode.

The black aura still tried to steal magic power from my body, but I was able to keep it suppressed for a short time, at least.

I used my map to mark the fragments of the black line the dragon had torn up and went around destroying them with the Divine Blade one by one.

There was no telling what might happen if I left those things around.

One of the pieces was attached to a still-living giant mutant rat.

Just as I approached it—the rat turned inside-out, exposing its core and becoming an unstable slime-like creature that began to move.

It absorbed nearby garbage and dead monsters, expanding each time. Giant mutant rats were usually level 10 to 20, but after it grew, this one reached level 50.

There were still some red-rope monsters left to be destroyed, so this could have been really bad.

I used Magic Hand to lift the rat-slime into the air, then hit it with the Condense and Laser combo, blasting it and its defense barrier to bits.

Evidently, normal attacks worked on the shreds of the black lines just fine.

I squinted at the core as it fell through the air.

The black line had burrowed into the exposed core.

Jumping into the air, I sliced up the core with my Divine Blade and destroyed it, black line and all, before it hit the ground.

After this round of cleanup, I used “Skyrunning” to head to the sky dragon that was still flattening hills outside the royal capital.

The sky dragon’s status in my AR display read **Rampage** and **Erosion: Evil God’s Spawn**.

I guess the **UNKNOWN** black lines really were fragments of the Evil God like Mito said.

I opened my map.

There were twenty-seven spots where the black lines were eating into the sky dragon. The worst areas were the head, the tail, and the inverted scale.

All right, then...

This was going to be rough, but I didn’t have much choice.

I stepped closer to the sky dragon, Divine Blade in hand.

The out-of-control dragon swung its giant tail toward me, silvery-white scales glistening. The centrifugal force accelerated the tail past the speed of sound as it closed in.

The picture books about the ancestral king Yamato said that the sky dragon’s scales could deflect even a Holy Sword.

That they once blocked the Golden Boar Lord's Magic Sword, too.

But before my Divine Blade, they were like scraps of paper.

I sliced off the dragon's tail, destroying the large amount of black lines that were creeping up it to encroach on the rest of the dragon's body.

KUROOOOUUUUNN!

As the dragon howled in pain, I ran up its back, carving out pieces of its flesh to erase the black lines.

It was a little violent, but if I took too long, the lines might take over its body entirely. That was sure to cause even more damage than a demon lord.

Mentally apologizing for the rough treatment, I hardened my heart and forced myself to keep going.

Within just a minute or two, I was able to get rid of most of the black lines, although it left me soaked in dragon blood.

That just left the inverted scale and the head.

Obviously, I couldn't just lop those off.

My best bet was probably to grab the black lines and rip them out. But if I touched them directly, I might get affected, too.

I created "Holy Light Armor" around the hand that wasn't holding the Divine Blade.

But just as I was reaching for the first black line, I stopped.

This thing is a god, even if it's only a small piece. One wrong move could easily lead to destruction.

Scolding myself for my hubris, I had an idea and changed the settings of my "Holy Light Armor."

If you could change the components of a Holy Sword to make a Magic Sword instead...

And if the magic-based "Spellblade" had an alternate form like "Sacredblade"...

Couldn't you reproduce the power of a god in the same way?

I used the power of my Divine Blade to fill the "Holy Light Armor" with godly strength.

The blue glow of the holy light slowly turned jet-black like the Divine Blade.

It's the same color as the black lines, too...

Don't think about nonsense like that right now, Satou.

I used my hand, now imbued with godly power, to grab the black line sticking out of the dragon's head like a tuft of hair and yank it away.

The dragon shrieked in even more agony than before, but I couldn't stop to worry about that.

As I pulled out the black line, I used the Divine Blade in my other hand to destroy it.

Then, when I pulled out the last black line attached to the dragon's inverted scale, I accidentally pulled the scale off, too.

I guess that really is a dragon's weak point. The sky dragon screeched, then fainted dead away.

I silently apologized to the sky dragon as I destroyed that last black line.

"Phew, I'm exhausted."

I sheathed the Divine Blade and put it away in Storage, then opened my menu.

As I checked the map to make sure there were no black lines left, I took a peek at the log in my AR display while I was at it.

> Defeated Evil God's Spawn.

> Defeated Evil God's Spawn.

> Defeated Evil God's Spawn.

> Title Acquired: Godly One

> Title Acquired: Violator of Taboo

> Skill Acquired:

> Title Acquired: Torture King

> Title Acquired: Sadist

> Title Acquired: Sky Dragon Destroyer

I didn't appreciate most of those titles, but it was a little late to complain about whoever was in charge of the system at this point.

Now I also regretted missing the chance to destroy the Evil God Fragment that must have been inside the cardinal with my Divine Blade. I didn't have much choice since I'd had to prioritize the nearly activated magic circle at the time, though.

As much as it pained me, striving for the ideal outcome only ended in pain. I should just be happy that things turned out all right.

I didn't see the nameless skill in my skill list; maybe the empty SKILL ACQUIRED message was a bug. Based on the rest of the log, maybe it was a hidden skill for using the unregistered ability to channel godly power through my hand or something.

"Oops, better worry about that later."

Feeling like I might faint from the physical and mental exhaustion, I nonetheless used some advanced recovery potions and healing magic to tend to the sky dragon's wounds.

A barrel of advanced magic potion literally worked wonders: The severed tail, torn scales, and broken claws and horns began to regrow.

While the broken fang didn't recover, that was probably no big deal; the black dragon once told me that their fangs were periodically replaced with new growth anyway.

Maybe it was the exhaustion, but my thoughts were getting a little careless.

This might have been the first time I'd been so exhausted since coming to this fantasy world.

Also... I realized I hadn't had any feeling in my left hand for a while.

I removed the glove that was part of my Nanashi costume to take a look.

“What in the world...?”

My breath caught in my throat when I saw my left hand emerge from the glove.

It had lost all color and turned jet-black...

Epilogue

Satou here. They say you have to take the bad with the good, but I wish lousy things wouldn't happen right after something positive. Everyone prefers a happy ending, right?

"Is this an aftereffect of using godly energy?"

I stared down at my left hand, which had turned completely black.

If I was still an edgy teen suffering from *chuunibyo*, I probably would've been super excited to say things like "My left arm! I can't control it!" but now it was nothing but an inconvenience.

Although my fingers could still move just fine, I had no feeling in my hand.

The jet-black color went up to about halfway between my wrist and elbow.

But as I looked at it, the inky border crept higher.

That's not good.

I tried using a lesser elixir on my arm, but it had no effect.

The high-quality elixirs were a last resort, as I was saving them for Arisa.

"Looks like medicine won't work..."

How was I supposed to have the full amount of fun if I went to visit the pretty ladies of the night with no feeling in one hand?

I wonder if I'd grow a new arm if I cut this one off?

Possibly out of exhaustion, my thoughts started to stray into stupid directions.

Normally, I would never try something like that, but in that moment, it felt like a divine revelation of an idea.

I produced the Holy Sword Durandal from Storage.

Holding it with my right hand, I tapped the blade against my darkened left

hand a few times.

All I felt was a dull metallic *thud*.

Steeling myself, I aimed for the border on my left arm between the black color and my natural skin and swung Durandal down toward it.

With a *clang*, it broke right in half.

...The Holy Sword Durandal, that is.

How tough is this arm if it can break a damn Holy Sword now?

I groaned in exhaustion, silently mocking myself.

Magic power flowed out of the broken end of the Holy Sword, becoming a wind that blew through the area.

I used my always-active Magic Hand to grab the other half of the sword and tightened my control on my magic so it wouldn't flow out through the remaining half in my hand.

Then I put the broken end into the scabbard, followed by what was left of the base.

When I used the scripture before, it was able to fix the small nicks from my fight with the Golden Boar Lord.

I decided it couldn't hurt to try using it again now.

"<For eternity,> Durandal."

Blue light flooded out of the scabbard.

Once it died down, I drew Durandal and found that it had returned to its unbroken state.

I can't say I wasn't hopeful, but I was amazed that it had actually fixed the broken blade.

That was my dependable backup blade for you. I was glad I'd be able to keep using it in the future.

I decided to try cutting off my arm one more time.

When I touched the area I'd tried to cut before, it felt the same as the black

part, even though it still looked normal.

I rolled up the sleeve of my Nanashi outfit and used my left hand to touch the area halfway between my elbow and shoulder, confirming that the upper arm was still soft, then sliced into it with Durandal.

“...Nnngh!”

There was a spray of red blood, and my arm fell to the ground.

It didn't actually hurt thanks to my “Pain Resistance” skill, but it still wasn't exactly fun to look at.

I put my falling arm into Storage, then used Magic Hand to put pressure on the wound.

Blood dripped from the stump of my arm and hit the ground.

And then... WHOOSH!

A bundle of thick green vines burst out of the ground and up toward the heavens, shaking the ground and the air alike.

At first I jumped away, thinking it was a plant-type monster, until I realized it was actually just the leaves and vines of a potato plant, extending some ten yards into the air.

It was a perfectly normal plant, aside from the ridiculously large scale.

Had my blood caused this somehow?

Maybe I could experiment with it when I had some free time, but now wasn't the right moment for that.

I produced a barrel of greater healing potion and plunged my arm into it. I was all out of watered-down vials of the stuff.

The advanced potion mixed with my blood.

I would have to dispose of this barrel afterward. It felt like a bit of a waste, but I could always make more potions.

Finally, my arm began to grow back. Like when Zarigon lost his leg in the Upper Stratum of the labyrinth, it started with the regrowth of bone, then muscles, tendons, and so on.

It reminded me of a scene I saw in an anime a long time ago where a person regenerated from a skeleton.

“Phew, now I’m *really* beat...”

Bright sunlight shone down on me.

The eclipse was finally over.



“Skyyyy...!”

“No response from master.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on voices: Mito, who was flying from the royal capital on her staff, and Homu-Homu, flying with her own wings.

Several sparkles of light flew toward me from their direction.

It was Claidheamh Soluis. It must be returning to me now that it was done guarding Mito.

The Holy Sword formed back into one before my eyes, and I put it away in Storage.

“Sky!”

“<...Nn, nnngh...>”

I heard the sky dragon starting to wake up, grumbling in dragon language.

“Sky, are you okay?”

“Master?”

“<...Ah!>” The sky dragon’s head whipped up. “<Mito! Run away! He’s coming! He’s coming back!>”

I had a weird feeling that she was referring to me, but I’m sure it was my imagination.

“Huh? You okay, Sky?”

The dragon grabbed Mito and Homu-Homu in her front claws.

“<We’ve got to get out of here before he pulls my inverted scale off

agaaaaain!>”

“W-wait a minute!”

Screaming, the sky dragon took off into the air with both girls in tow.

“Man, they’re noisy...”

I watched as the sky dragon vanished into the distance.

If Mito was the same person I thought she was, then I wanted to tell her that I was Ichirou Suzuki; we no doubt had a lot to talk about.

But that wasn’t my top priority right now. I put a marker on Mito so I could go find her and talk anytime.

“Masterrrr!”

My group arrived on the airship.

I put the bloodied barrel and strangely grown plant into Storage, then used “Skyrunning” to move toward the deck.

“I-is it over already? Things got really crazy there. Are you okay? You’re not hurt?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

There was probably no reason to tell her things that would only worry her more.

I landed on the deck.

“Nana, bring the airship back to the royal capital. We still have lives to save!”

“Yes, master.”

We would need to fix the fields, too, but saving people who were trapped under rubble or seriously injured came first. Once everyone was safe, I figured I could use my new Earth Magic spell Cultivation to fix up the farmland in one go.

On our way to the royal capital, I used two volleys of Remote Arrows to destroy any remaining red-rope monsters and informed the king that I’d defeated the Evil God’s Spawn.

I’d already used my map search to track down the sky dragon’s broken fangs,

scales, and so on that had flown off in the battle, since I didn't want them to cause any new trouble.

"Master, look!"

In the sky above the royal capital, the projection of the king had reappeared, announcing that Nanashi the Hero had resolved the peril threatening the city.

So when we landed in the royal capital to continue rescuing people, many of the citizens waved at us and raised cheers of thanks and celebration.

"Ni-hee-hee...?"

"They're all smiling, sir."

"That's because all of you worked so hard."

I patted Tama and Pochi on the head, praising the group's efforts.

It's important to make sure they get lots of appreciation as a good motivator.

"All right, back to work! There's still lots of people who need our help."

"Aye-aye!"

"Roger, sir!"

Arisa clapped her hands, and the other girls struck poses to get into the mood.

While I used Magic Hand to help people from the deck, Mia was giving directions to her sand sprites below when she paused to call out to me.

"Satou."

She pointed out some people slumped in the corners of alleys or staring at the ground darkly.

"Not everyone's going to be excited to see us."

Mia shook her head. "Miasma."

"...Wow, you're right."

Using my "Miasma Vision," I saw that the miasma in the area was as dense as in the depths of a labyrinth.

Was it because of the Evil God's Spawn?

At this rate, some people might get miasma poisoning.

I unleashed my normally suppressed spirit light, and it began slowly evaporating all the miasma it touched.

This way, I could clear out the miasma while still helping people.

"Sergeant Tama, injured person spotted at two o'clock!"

"Aye-aye, sir..."

"Sergeant Pochi, there are people still trapped in the broken-down building up ahead."

"Roger, sir!"

"Nana, there's a child crying near a fallen carriage at eleven o'clock!"

"Yes, Arisa."

"Mia, have your sand sprites clear out the rubble blocking the road. Liza and Lulu, help them with that, please."

"Mm, got it."

"Understood!"

"I'll do my best."

Arisa's directions quickly and effectively put the group to work.

I took over steering the airship for her, still using Magic Hand to help people who my group wouldn't be able to reach.

"Master, isn't that Neru over there?"

"Ms. Tifaleeza and the others, too."

"Looks like the Echigoya Company is giving out food."

Looking at my map, I saw that the company was running soup kitchens in about a dozen different areas of the royal capital. I was glad I could count on them to take action without my needing to direct them.

We took turns taking breaks to eat, too, while we continued our work.

The airship went around the capital from the outer wall toward the center in a slow spiral. By the time we arrived at the nobles' district, the sun had already set.

"Ah! It's Karina, sir!"

"Looks like the Muno manor is safe."

Lady Karina was helping clear out the rubble at some neighboring houses that had evidently been ravaged by red-rope monsters, along with her maids Erina and the newbie.

I used Magic Hand to help them out a little and waved at Lady Karina when she excitedly cried out "Sir Hero!" before moving on to the next area.

The mansions of Duke Ougoch and Duke Vistall were close to the royal capital, so while they'd still taken some damage, no one needed treatment.

When we arrived at the royal castle, I gave a cheerful wave to the king and prime minister as they thanked me profusely in the castle keep, then set about saving people nearby.

About one chime later, we'd taken care of most of the rescue work and started taking breaks in shifts.

It occurred to me that the cardinal's Brace of Stolen Divinity was still buried in some rubble. I recovered three golden bracelets in total, each reading **Brace of Stolen Divinity (Counterfeit)**. Tripling the effect must have been how he fooled my AR.

"Satou." Mia toddled over to me. "Sakura Pearl."

She produced the pink pearl from her Fairy Pack and handed it to me.

It was the item she'd received from the sakura dryad.

"Bloom."

"It won't be a burden on the tree?"

"It's fine. Buds."

Apparently, it would work without a problem because the buds were already growing.

I brought the airship close to the Royal Sakura and produced my own Sakura Pearl as well.

“Let’s do it together.”

“Mm.”

We both filled our Sakura Pearls with magic.

“I, Misanaria of Bolenan Forest, entreat the sakura of the Shiga Kingdom. Let your beautiful flowers bloom and bring smiles to the people whose hearts have been darkened by calamity.”

A pink glow emitted from both of us and lit up the Royal Sakura Tree.

Then it whirled up into the air in a spiral, spreading across the sky over the royal capital.

“Oooh!”

“Byooti-full...”

“Let the flowers bloom, sir!”

When the light faded, the enormous sakura tree was in full bloom with cherry blossoms.

“Master, look! It’s amazing!”

Lulu called out to me from where she was making rice balls for the soup kitchen.

“Master.”

“Look, master!”

Nana and Liza called out to me, too, then gazed up at the sakura.

After that, none of them said a word.

I knew exactly how they felt. The sight of the Royal Sakura Tree blossoming in the sunlight was beautiful enough to take anyone’s breath away.

“Satou.”

Entranced, Mia leaned her head against my arm.

“What gorgeous flowers...”

I joined the rest of my friends in staring up at the sakura contentedly.

Maybe tonight we can throw a big flower-viewing party to admire the sakura and the moon.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Hiro Ainana.

Thank you so much for picking up *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, Vol. 17!

It's thanks to all of you readers that I can keep putting out so many volumes. I'll keep making the story even more interesting from now on, so please keep on supporting it in the future, too.

Now then, let's discuss some of the highlights of this volume.

I rewrote this volume from the web novel based around the royal capital's sakura tree that isn't blooming.

In this print version, characters like the Sakura Protector and the princess get a lot more time in the spotlight. Of course, there are brand-new characters and more stories for the leading ladies, too, don't worry.

Let me explain things with just a little bit of spoilers, to make it easier to follow.

After getting involved with the Shiga Eight Swordsmen and the internal conflict of Vistall Duchy last volume, Satou and friends spent time this volume watching street performers like snake charmers, admiring a water fountain, and other fun sightseeing activities.

After all the new strength they gained in Labyrinth City, the group might just discover new sides of themselves in the royal capital.

Arisa has many hobbies, Lulu loves cooking, Mia loves music, Nana loves children, Tama loves art, Pochi loves picture books, and Liza loves training.

As the girls explore their passions, find new paths, and take their hobbies to new levels, Satou supports their enjoyment from the shadows. Without forgetting his own hobbies, too, of course.

But naturally, there's more than just hobbies in this volume.

After they receive medals from the king, new friends and reunions await beneath the Royal Sakura Tree.

Will these meetings be a blessing or the beginning of new trials? You'll have to read the book to find out. Like the previous volumes, you'll be able to see things differently if you reread it from the beginning after you finish. Please give it a try if you'd like.

Will the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony, the big year-end event in the royal capital, go off without a hitch? Will Satou and friends be able to enjoy their New Year's soba and shrine visits in peace? Keep an eye out for hidden flags throughout the story.

I'll wrap up the highlights of Volume 17 here to avoid taking away your enjoyment by spoiling too much.

That being said, since I packed it with so many features, this volume ended up being over 170,000 characters, one of the longest volumes yet. I hope you enjoy this extra-long stay in the world of *Death March*.

Now then, the usual thank-yous!

The specific revisions, suggestions, and advice from my two editors, A and I, were instrumental in clearing up sections that were too long, confusing, or repetitive, and made each scene more realistic and exciting. I hope you'll continue to give me such wonderful guidance.

I can't thank shri enough for providing such wonderful illustrations that bring *Death March* to life with every volume. The cover with Lulu and the frontispiece with Princess Sistina are especially lovely.

And of course, thank you to everyone in the Kadokawa Books editorial department and everyone involved in the production, sales, marketing, distribution, and multimedia work that brought this book into the world.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all to you readers!!

Thank you for reading this volume all the way to the end!

Well then, let's meet again next volume for the heartwarming royal capital

relaxation arc!

Hiro Ainana

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Insert](#)
3. [Title Page](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [Conferring Honors](#)
6. [Interlude](#)
7. [The Peaceful Royal Capital](#)
8. [The Red-Rope Monsters](#)
9. [Forbidden Library](#)
10. [Interlude](#)
11. [Plenty of Pastimes](#)
12. [The Hapless Detective](#)
13. [Interlude](#)
14. [Evil-Cleansing Ceremony](#)
15. [The “God”](#)
16. [Epilogue](#)
17. [Afterword](#)
18. [Yen Newsletter](#)